ゼノサーガ エピソードII

Xenosaga

EPISODE II

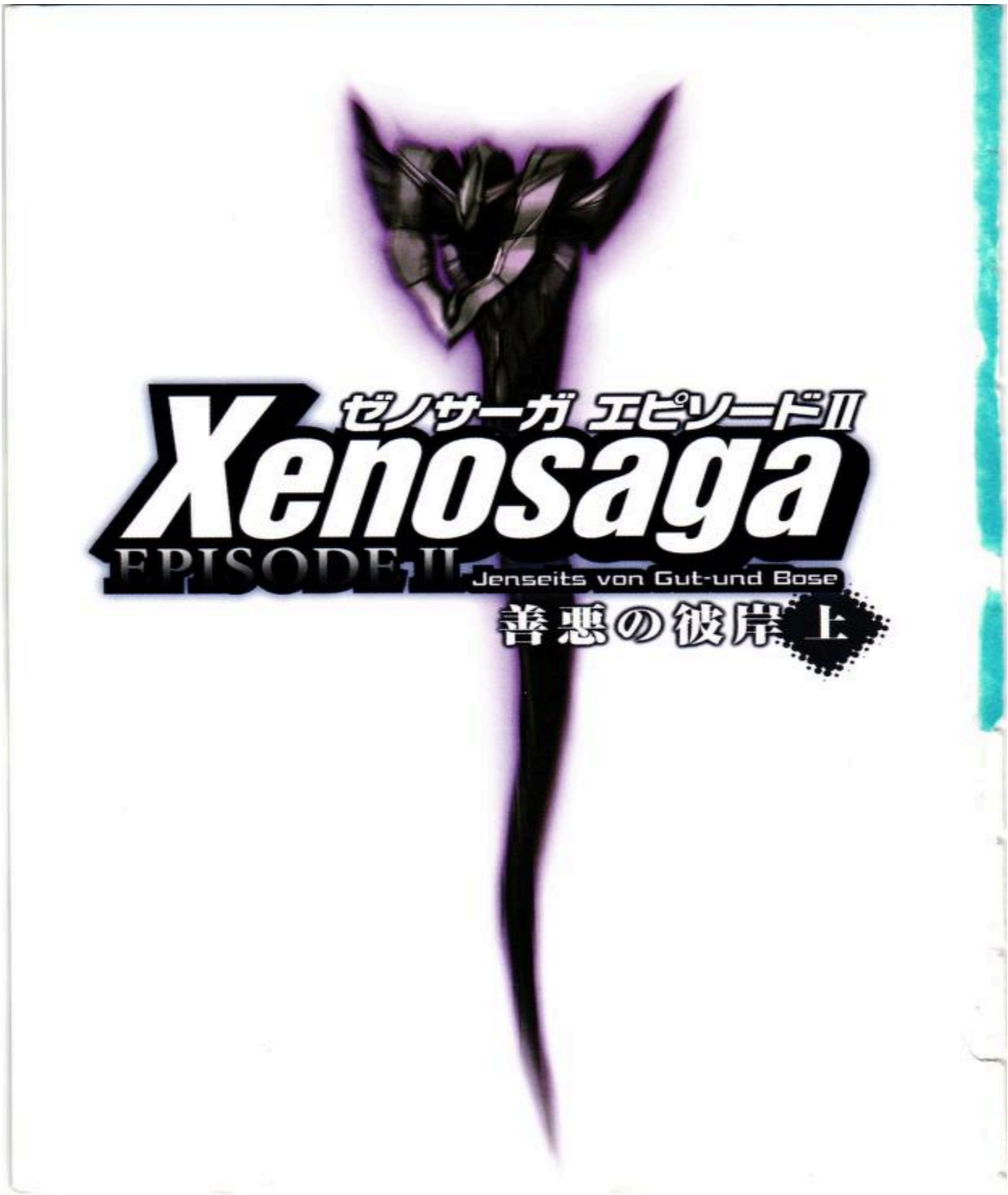
Jenseits von Gut-und Bose

善悪の彼岸 上

愛沢匡

ファミ通文庫

SPECIAL STORY



Xenosaga Episode II Jenseits von Gut-und Bose Beyond Good and Evil, Part 1
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Synopsis:
Humanity was forced to leave the Earth sphere in the year 20XX due to the appearance of the mysterious object Zohar. 4000 years later, humanity, having formed a galactic federation of approximately 500,000 planets, developed the combat android KOS-MOS to counter the unidentified lifeforms known as Gnosis. KOS-MOS and her developer, Shion, gradually become embroiled in the conflict between humanity and the Gnosis over the Zohar. The grand epic "Xenosaga," which depicts everything from the creation to the end of humanity, has its Episode II novelized!!!!!.

About the Writers:
Tadashi Aizawa
Born in 1976. Lives in Tokyo.
Debuted as a writer in 2002 after winning the "Biohazard Novel Award" gold prize. Majored in Latin American literature in university. Hobbies include playing and collecting percussion instruments. Recently, while writing novels little by little, he has been active as an editor and designer. Writes manuscripts in InDesign.

Takuya Io
Illustrator. Born in 1975. Active in a wide range of genres, from Gundam to original illustrations for biShionjo games. This book is his first cover art work. Occasionally works as a modeler... Second Wonder Showcase selected participants at the Wonder Festival. His favorite car is the rare "WiLL Cypha," which he likes for its inconsistent design lines.
Cover Illustration: Takuya Io
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Character Name	Description
Pellegri	A woman who supports the U-TIC Organization's combat troops as Margulis's aide. She has a soft demeanor but is ruthless when necessary to achieve her goals.
Albedo Piazzola	A U.R.T.V. with white hair and immortal regenerative abilities. He shows an abnormal obsession with Y-Data sealed within Momo.
Dimitri Yuriev	The creator of the U.R.T.V.s, born through genetic manipulation. He is the head of the Yuriev Institute.
Shelly Godwin	Lives within the Kukai Foundation. She supports Gaignun and Jr.

Mary Godwin	Lives within the Kukai Foundation. She supports Gaignun and Jr.
Gaignun Kukai	The representative of the Kukai Foundation, a special foundation established by the Militia government. He is one of the U.R.T.V.s, just like Jr. and Albedo.
Jin Uzuki	Shion's brother and a former Federation Army Captain. After the Militia conflict 14 years ago, he retired and currently runs a bookstore in Second Militia.
M.O.M.O.	*Multiple Observative Mimetic Organicus* A prototype of the Hyaku-Shiki (Type-100) general-purpose observation Realian developed by the late Dr. Joachim Mizrahi, the founder of the U-TIC Organization, for the purpose of observing Gnosis.
Chaos	A boy with the mysterious ability to make Gnosis disappear. Although he looks young, his worried expression and philosophical statements give him a somewhat old-fashioned impression.
Shion Uzuki	Belongs to the First Development Department of the massive conglomerate, Vector Industries. Chief of development for the KOS-MOS development project's integrated operating system.

Pope of the Ormus (Margulis)	An old man revered as the Pope of the Ormus immigrant fleet. He seems to be well-versed with the U-TIC Organization, but his true identity is shrouded in mystery.
Helmer	The commander-in-chief of the U-TIC Organization, reigning with absolute charisma. He was active behind the scenes during the Miltian Conflict 14 years ago. Second Miltian Autonomous State Government Representative Deliberative Member. He holds the title of former Vice Admiral of the Galactic Federation Army. He has a deep connection with Jr. and others since his military days.
Juli Mizrahi	The wife of the late Dr. Joachim Mizrahi. She resents her husband, who was the cause of the Miltian Conflict, and takes an intolerant attitude towards Momo, who was developed with the doctor to resemble her daughter.
Allen Ridgely	Vector First Development Bureau Assistant Chief. As Shion's subordinate, he is involved in the development of the KOS-MOS development plan integrated operation system.

Canaan	A Realian who specializes in A.M.W.S. piloting techniques. He is given an unofficial mission by Helmer, the representative of the Miltian Autonomous State government.
ZIGGY	He belonged to the Federal Police, but after dying in the line of duty, he was resurrected by the "Life Recycling Law." His name as a cyborg is "Ziglatt 8". He is assigned the mission of guarding Momo.
Jr.	One of the U.R.T.V. created to counter U-DO. He currently serves as the representative director of the Kukai Foundation with Gaignun.
KOS-MOS	A female-type combat android designed and developed by Vector Industries using advanced technology. There are many mysteries surrounding her development.

【Intro】

... Thus, the human world took the year the ancient savior was born from the womb of the Holy Virgin as year one, and from there on the calendar grew with each passing year. After approximately two thousand and several decades of years had passed, humanity discovered an unknown structure by a lakeside that completely overturned previous historical perspectives. Humans, with awe, named this Zohar.

At the discovery of this structure, human civilization trembled, and also became excited and enthusiastic. And they did not realize the true danger that its discovery brought.A certain Zohar researcher once said: During that period---was humanity researching Zohar? Or was it Zohar that was researching humanity?

The records from that time have already been lost along with Lost Jerusalem, said to be the planet of humanity's origin, and the details of what specific events continuously occurred leading up to that ruin are unknown.

As a result, humanity lost its home, and a large number of people were swallowed up in imaginary space. Led by Vector Industries, which also directed the excavation of the Zohar, humanity took a gamble on its existence, and succeeded in the initial development of the U.M.N. (Unus Mundus Network), which enables space jumps. Humanity abandoned its home star, and became strangers in outer space.

Four thousand years passed.Humanity scattered across half a million stars, enjoying a new civilization.The governments established on each planet were bound together by the Stellar Federation Congress, and interstellar distribution was handled by the U.M.N., which was governed by the Federation. The U.M.N. used the Zohar as an energy source to spread a network of information and transportation into outer space. This brought about the overcoming of the limits of time and space that lay between planets, and enabled the coexistence of humanity over super-wide areas.

Humanity advanced technologies such as life recycling and cyborgization of the body, seeking the complete mastery of the body in the space age.
They also succeeded in developing synthetic humans called Realiens, healing the loneliness of strangers. However, humanity never forgot the memory of losing their home.

The Original Zohar was a research subject not only for the practical technological research of the U.M.N. but also for investigating all the mysteries of this universe

connected to the cause of the home world's loss.This structure was eventually enshrined on a certain planet.The name of the planet was called Milcha[1].Dr. Joachim Mizrahi, the leading authority on Zohar research, established the Mizrahi Brain Physics Research Institute, a Zohar research organization, on this land, and later became the general manager of the U-TIC organization established by the Federal Government.

Under the management of the Star Cluster Federation Government, the U-TIC organization, under the guidance of Dr. Joachim Mizrahi[2], advanced the research of the Original Zohar and succeeded in developing emulators that retained the original Zohar's characteristics to a considerable extent. Zohar research achieved rapid development during this period.

However, a series of critical events occurred one after another, including large-scale riots by the Realians that occurred successively in various parts of the Federation, followed by the armed uprising of the U-TIC organization, and the mass appearance of the mysterious existence known as Gnosis.

After that, the Zohar control device U-DO went out of control, and the planet Milcha was surrounded by a dual black hole along with the Original Zohar, isolating it in space.This series of events was called the Milcha Conflict.

Dr. Joachim Mizrahi lost his life during this conflict.However, the data called the Y-data, which is the key to the Zohar research reached by the doctor, was stored inside a Realian modeled after his late daughter. The late Dr. Mizrahi was regarded as the mastermind of the conflict and became an object of fear and contempt in the star cluster through which his name came to echo.

The **U-TIC Organization** was dismantled by the Galactic Federation, but a part of it secretly persisted as a terrorist organization holding more radical beliefs.
The people of **Miltia** colonized a new planet and named it **Second Miltia**.

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[1] Miruchia, is how Miltia is spelled, It sometimes comes up as Michah in translator so It's likely Miltia is a Japanese to English corruption of the Hebrew name Milcha, the sister of Serah. She was Queen of the city of Harran. She was also Abraham's brother's wife. It means Queen. It also mildly implies that this is a nation like Harran set up by those attempting to escape the reaches of a massive empire like Babylon corrupted by its leadership and religion.
[2] His name is the name of the father of the virgin Mary and the word for the Middle East.

The Miltia Autonomous State Government was organized, and **General Helmer** (former Vice Admiral), who had distinguished himself in quelling the Miltia conflict, was chosen as the representative of that government.

The Helmer administration established the **Kukai Foundation** on a space colony in orbit around the planet, with the primary objective of investigating the causes of the Miltia conflict, and began to follow an independent path within the Galactic Federation.

...According to records, at the end of that Miltia conflict, the commanding officers of the Federal Army General Staff Headquarters decided to deploy the biological weapon **UR.TV** (U-Retro Virus) to Miltia to suppress the U-TIC Organization.
However, General Helmer, concerned about the UR.TV's rampage, secretly sent two men to the large, burning planet of Miltia…

【Chapter 1】Miltia Afterimage Airspace

Encephalon Dive Record <Miltia Conflict> File Organization No. 127
Subject: code/Canaan/Realian
special type/details unknown

The misty cloud sea unraveled and flowed left and right as mist.
The E.S. Asher[3] stayed airborne above the Miltia capital.
Canaan narrowed his eyes and surveyed her surroundings.
The monitors inside the machine covered almost all directions.
The sky overhead was covered in a reddish black sea of clouds.
The residual sun shone in from the distant mountain range surrounding the basin, deepening in astringency with each passing moment.
The city lights scattered across the bottom of the black basin, like a nebula stained in the pitch black of space. He held his breath unnaturally, and the cockpit was filled with silence.

The civilization around him was dying so quietly that one couldn't even hear the creaking sound of its collapse. The moribund city had already abandoned the humans crawling on its surface and lied quietly, awaiting its final moment.
Canaan closed his eyes and sank his back into the seat.

A slight vibration—, the outside world, converted into a signal. A vortex of air was entangled in the movable parts of the E.S. Asher. Canaan calculated and estimated the distance between the ground and the machine in his head.
He was still in the atmosphere, but his sense of up and down was slightly confused. This was likely from a nervous breakdown caused by receiving excessive G-force from the rapid descent from orbit. It was the price for exceeding the body's suitability threshold. Even though his head was cool, his body was surprised. It was an unavoidable nervous short circuit that would happen as long as he was designed in the shape of a person.

Canaan gradually acclimated his body and the E.S. Asher's maneuverability in that posture, silently immersing himself in a sense of unity with the sky.

---

[3] An Asher is a tree in hebrew, it also means happyness; In the Zohar it is one of the Names of YHVH;

"Aircraft surface temperature, normal value. Shifting to normal operation mode. Recalculating coordinates." The voice of Chaos, the navigator, rang out as he assisted in the main descent from the rear navigation seat installed in the upper rear. Noticing Canaan's gaze, his green amber eyes look down at Canaan.
His silver hair and brown skin were dyed in the colors of the setting sun.
"—Distance to point MN441, one two three, six six, two three, angle of intrusion error is zero point three."

"At this rate, we can almost certainly go straight to our destination without any problems."
Canaan nodded lightly in return.
It wasn't much different from the sky map he had drawn in his head until a moment ago. Both the aircraft and he were performing well. However, the heavy, unpleasant impression he received during the briefing could not be completely erased from his thoughts.

He looked at the images of the children listed on the HUD (Head-Up Display) in his hand.
URTV. The Faces of hundreds of children. Flaxen hair, large eyes, small noses and lips, probably around twelve years old in human age. Except for gender differences, they all looked like the same individuals.
A swarm of identification codes scrolled through the network of the database augmented in Canaan's brain and then synchronized with the video.
However, even after repeatedly searching the data, he couldn't find accurate information about these children who were subjects under protection.

Canaan frowned.
The database looped frantically, scratching at his head.
Chaos's voice interrupted Canaan's search operation.
"Proximity warning. Multiple interceptor aircraft believed to belong to the U-TIC organization have been confirmed. They are intercepting us and approaching at high speed on a direct course. If we continue straight, contact can be expected in about thirty seconds. I’m having difficulty confirming how many there are."

The approaching enemy A.M.W.S. (Aims) was on a disc-shaped stand. They were flying in formation. Only three could be confirmed visually. The silhouettes of the mobile weapons were floating in the sunset.
Canaan narrowed his eyes and leaned back in the seat.

"Shoot them all down! If you have time to count numbers, then use it to control the shield!Use the shockwave to get into an advantageous position. I'll leave the fire control to you."
"Understood---Aircraft type identification complete, they are 'Stoll Marine' models belonging to the U-TIC Organization. Looks like they're unmanned units. They have almost no G-limit, so their mobility is higher than ours. Be careful, they might perform very reckless maneuvers." Chaos announced in a calm voice.

A slight vibration from the seat transmitted into his body.
The sky in the atmosphere looked simple but it was filled with complex, intricate air currents. In aerial combat, the side who could more accurately grasp these invisible sky corridors would win.

Canaan loosened his gloved fingertips, preparing for the continuing battle.
The E.S. Asher spread its pale blue wings of light from the flight unit, drawing an arc and charging towards the enemy group.
The enemy A.M.W.S. group returned fire and scattered in three directions.
The E.S. Asher dodged the concentrated enemy fire, climbing through the sky.

"I'll make adjustments. More importantly, how is the feedback from the machine? This is a situation where a normal person would have fainted. If you overexert yourself, it will affect the operation's progress."
"It's okay. It seems to be pretty strong feedback, but it's rather stimulating for me."
"I see. But if you feel even the slightest abnormality, I will immediately cut the bypass to the navi-seat. I can operate this thing by myself." Canaan said calmly.
"Understood"
Dodging the turbulent air mass, the E.S. Asher flew.
The pursuing enemy aircraft are swallowed by the turbulence, their movement momentarily slowed.

In an instant, the E.S. Asher unleashed a blue magnetic shield from its entire body.
A sudden brake, a loop-de-loop while rolling in small movements. At the same time, beams of light from the A.B.R. swept through the sky, swallowing two enemies whole.
It was a high-output weapon capable of tearing even the fuselage of a battleship in outer space.

The enemy A.M.W.S. that took a direct hit instantly turned into two balls of flame and fell to the distant ground.Heaven and earth were inverted. The land of Miltia spread black overhead. Canaan sighted five enemy shadows ascending.

"There's no end to it. The A.B.R. is consuming a lot of energy. What should we do?"
Canaan looked at the city overhead.
"It can't be helped. It will be a significant deviation from the planned invasion route, but we will infiltrate the city area.
We'll move along the buildings, evading enemy search, and head for the center. Let’s do a power dive from this coordinate. Please recalculate the target point."
Canaan righted the E.S. Asher's posture.

The machine's balance against the ground made it seem like it was underwater as it maintained level flight and began a high-speed descent almost perfectly vertical.
His body was pulled upward. It felt like his shoulders would have been torn off If he hadn’t braced himself.

The office buildings with lights out, the mesh pattern of the highway. The urban landscape gradually expanded.The enemy aircraft rapidly approached as they maneuvered violently like a swarm of mosquitoes.

A formation surrounded the E.S. Asher.
The enemy aircraft crossed paths, and at the moment they aligned in a straight line, the A.B.R. light extended to the ground. The laser beam pierced four enemy A.M.W.S. simultaneously. Asher cut through the explosions. Another unit invaded the linear path.

Canaan pulled the trigger, but the laser’s light dulled and vanished near the muzzle.
"The A.B.R.'s energy is—" Chaos's voice said.
Enemy rifle rounds bounced off the surface shield of the E.S. Asher, exploding red on the monitor one after another.
The enemy aircrafts closed in.

————Zero point eight seconds until contact.
It was a distance where even the creaking of the enemy aircraft's drive parts could be felt nearby.
Evasion wasn’t possible in time. Using the A.B.R. muzzle as a spear, he increased the output. E.S. Asher plunged headfirst into the enemy aircraft's abdomen.

A violent impact shook the inside of the cockpit. The monitor was closed off by a black darkness in 360 degrees. Canaan closed his eyes and sharpened his nerves toward the outside. The enemy aircraft was bent in a V-shape at the fuselage and had fallen off the flight deck. The two aircraft were falling toward the ground as one mass.

Canaan opened his eyelids. A white light ran in a straight line across the black monitor. When the monitor’s function returned, a high-rise building was right in front of him. Canaan detached the A.B.R. from his right arm. Pushing the enemy away, the E.S. Asher glided horizontally, brushing past the wall of the building nearby.
After blowing past the rubble and turning over, the E.S. Asher stopped at a low altitude.

Canaan narrowed his eyes to confirm the enemy's shadow. The thin barrel of the A.B.R. was growing in the abdomen of the enemy A.M.W.S. The enemy aircraft crashed into a high-rise building, gouging out half of it as it fell and broke apart. Fragments flew off and bounced off the magnetic shield. Noise ran across the monitor. Canaan hit the console and started transferring a spare weapon to the E.S. Asher's empty right arm.

It was a 50mm Hand Gatling gun - it was considered light equipment for the E.S. Asher, but this was more suitable for urban combat.

"As expected—eight enemy units were shot down in twenty-two seconds, your skill is as impressive as the rumors say," Chaos said.

Canaan tapped the console with a fingertip and detached the flight unit with reduced output from the E.S. Asher's back. "We'll advance the operation before these explosions subside. The flames are flashy. While they might be okay for unmanned units, they could conversely attract manned units. These buildings, although they are already in ruins, are sufficient barriers for evading searches. We'll proceed straight down the highway towards the district where government-related offices are concentrated. Have the coordinates for the target point been re-measured?"
"Yeah—"

A semi-circular roof covered the highway entrance. It had almost completely collapsed. Its framework was exposed. The clouds covering the night sky were thick, and no stars could be seen. The light of the distant sunset had disappeared beyond the mountains surrounding the basin. Miltia, as seen from the cockpit, was a completely lifeless, hollowed-out city.

Below the highway, about ten meters wide, dark valleys between buildings stretched out, occasionally illuminated by the traces of destruction from explosions detonating overhead. Countless disc-shaped flying objects smoothly advanced in an organized formation through the artificial canyon.
It was visibly moving. The shape was very similar to the disc that the enemy's A.M.W.S. had been on during the previous battle. There was no sign of it noticing them.

Chaos announced the search results from the onboard computer.
"Aircraft type identification complete. They are 'Kufga Lily' type models belonging to the U-TIC organization. They are what you'd call an automated sensing mobile artillery unit. Their main armaments are homing rays. It seems to be something the U-TIC organization pulled out of storage that was used fifty years ago to suppress riots."
"Homing lasers, like something out of an ancient video game."
"It's better if we're not found. Let's proceed carefully."

There was no need to say it. This mission wasn't even known to their allies in the federal army. They were completely isolated and unsupported. If they responded to every enemy, they would run out of time.

Canaan carefully launched the E.S. Asher. To avoid reacting to the mobile artillery's sensors, he glided just above the highway, not too high, not too low.
Proceeding on this high-speed road required more nerve than aerial combat. Cracks and fissures ran everywhere, and if he was clumsy, he would slide down with the rubble to the far below.

Even dropping a fragment would stimulate the unmanned machines wandering through the valleys of the buildings. After about five minutes, when he was fully accustomed to the machine's controls, Canaan automatically scrolled the long list of U.R.T.V on the HUD again.

Some weapons of the U-TIC organization didn’t have autonomous fuel tanks and operated by linking with Zohar to obtain energy.
According to the U.R.T.V. performance section in the database, these hundreds of children seemed to have the ability to intervene in the Zohar control system. That part he understood. However, that did not explain the mission assigned to Canaan this time. The Mission: Protect the U.R.T.V.

Canaan became conscious of Chaos. He felt that this young man might be a little more informed about the situation.
"Regarding U.R.T.V., what specific problems do you anticipate will arise?"
Chaos remained silent for a while, and then opened his mouth.
"The Zohar control system they link with using that ability, U-DO, was originally designed and operated as a U.M.N. transfer system. However—biological transfers have been attempted many times so far, but all of them have ended in failure."

The database recorded in Canaan's brain had specific numbers for that.
"The record states that ninety-nine point seven-six percent resulted in immediate death."
"But, though very rare, there were survivors. However, not as humans, but as things."
"They never regained consciousness again."
"--- Mental collapse, huh?" Chaos nodded slightly.

"Mental collapse occurred in normal humans upon contact with U-DO. Therefore, even if they were U.R.T.V.s, designed and created as anti-existences to U-DO, the situation wouldn't change," General Helmer judged.
The General seemed to have inspected the Yuriev Institute once before. His impression at that time also helped this judgment.

"Were there no test cases before this? At least something close to live-fire training should have been conducted on the Encephalon."
"Training data from the U-DO simulator was not left behind. Dr. Dimitri Yuriev, the creator of the U.R.T.V.s, probably didn't think of them as biological weapons as the military brass intended. Reading the records he left behind, I feel as if he was driven by a deep-seated obsession. That's why various speculations are flying around about his disappearance. There's even a suspicious theory that he was murdered by a U.R.T.V."

The list's automatic scrolling ended.
At the end of the list, several individuals with slightly different appearances from the other children could be seen. Their hair and eye colors were different.
These groups with different hair colors were listed as variants born in the final stages of U.R.T.V. development.
…They were made.

Rubedo, Albedo, Nigredo—their names were red, white, and black respectively. There was also an image of a girl's face inserted between them, but her proper name was erased.[4]
"...Why did the higher-ups believe that such an unstable thing would be a trump card in the current operation?"
"The concrete material came from a report by Dr. Yuri Mizrahi[5], who was conducting joint research with Dr. Yuriev. In that report, the interpretation of the U.R.T.V.'s integrated consciousness was generally positive."

---

[4] These Latin terms represent the major stages of the Magnum Opus (Great Work), the alchemical process for creating the Philosopher's Stone.
Nigredo (The Blackening): The initial stage of decomposition and decay. It represents "death" to the old self, where the prima materia (starting material) is broken down through putrefaction. Psychologically, it is the confrontation with the Shadow—the dark, unacknowledged parts of one's personality.
Albedo (The Whitening): A stage of purification and washing that follows the chaos of Nigredo. It is often symbolized by the moon or a white dove. In psychology, it marks the emergence of the soul and the point where the "fog lifts," providing clarity and emotional cleansing.
Citrinitas (The Yellowing): The "solar light" stage, signifying spiritual awakening and wisdom. Though some later alchemists combined this with Rubedo, it traditionally represents the rising sun and the transition from lunar reflection to solar consciousness.
Rubedo (The Reddening): The final stage of integration and wholeness. It is the culmination of the Great Work, symbolized by the Phoenix or gold. Psychologically, it represents the union of opposites and the realization of the true Self.

[5] This is Juli Mizrahi's japanese name

"Yuri Mizrahi. She was the wife of Joachim Mizrahi, who founded the U-TIC organization."
"Dr. Yuri Mizrahi submitted many friendly reports about the U.R.T.V.'s communication ability. About the positive exchange that took place between Rubedo of the U.R.T.V. and their only daughter, who had a severe communication disorder—"

Canaan gazed at the red-haired boy named Rubedo in the record file. He had red hair and blue, hollow eyes. "And that was misinterpreted as a source of reassurance? The general staff is only seeing what they want to see at this late stage."
"Their mental collapse could also cause a fatal event called the Zohar runaway. Is that… No! If that happens, the domain shift that expelled humanity from Lost Jerusalem could be reproduced."

Canaan reached out and deleted the U.R.T.V. list.
E.S. Asher was approaching a hub unit where the highway split into four. It was on the boundary line approaching the government office area.A giant driving shop could be seen on the right. On both sides of the road, countless cars were piled up like snowdrifts.

An enormous number of human-shaped objects were scattered above and below them.They were the corpses of Realiens who had run wild prior to the conflict. They were all already dead and completely motionless. The mountains of pale white bodies covered in thin darkness were illuminated by the blinking light of a traffic information board.

A feeling faintly stirred. Could this be what was called anxiety? Canaan looked down at them listlessly.Chaos began tapping the console in a hurry.
"The target Labyrinthos should be up ahead, but something's wrong. The observation of the scheduled point is greatly distorted. It's as if space itself is warped. According to the map, the central management building of the severe neurological ward is about ten kilometers ahead. The coordinate data is changing rapidly around that area."

The voice rose and fell gently, with static surrounding the main melody.
"This is the song of Nephilim[6]..."
The song could be heard pouring out from the pillar of light.
"This sound, no, is it a song? That's…"

---

[6]One of the 5 names referring to human angel hybrids from the predeluvian period. It connotes that they appear to fall from the heavens when viewed from below due to their large size. The name also means topplers and the fallen.

Canaan bit his teeth and concentrated his consciousness, barely catching the sensation transmitted from the seat. Chaos's voice trembled slightly.
"Impossible. No matter how much the U-TIC Organization knows the danger of this singing voice, they shouldn't..."
"What on earth is happening to them? This can't continue."
Someone was approaching from behind.

"Chaos, hold on. It seems they are forming a siege. We need to escape this situation."
The E.S. Asher jumped out and was attacked by gunfire from behind.
Canaan suddenly accelerated the E.S. Asher.
Simultaneously, three Federation A.M.W.S. began pursuing the E.S. Asher from behind.

The legs of the E.S. Asher scraped against the road, sending up high sparks. The wreckage of the crashed hover mobile scattered.
Gunfire grazed the machine. Canaan saw the two Federation A.M.W.S. in front and made the E.S. Asher jump sideways. One arm of the E.S. Asher, which had lost its balance, scraped against the road, and with a shock, the left arm part came off at the shoulder and bounced away on the road.

Canaan propped up the leaning E.S. Asher. It absorbed the impact of the landing with its knee joints. The E.S. Asher tumbled forward into the rubble.
Sand and gravel was kicked up, and cracks of noise ran across the monitor.
Canaan raised himself up, narrowed his eyes, and scanned for enemy silhouettes with his naked eyes.

"It seems we've been judged as the enemy. Are those guys U.R.T.V.s?"
Chaos shook his head.
"Probably not. They are general Federal soldiers who participated in the drop operation. Of course, U.R.T.V.s receive a full range of training in combat techniques using A.M.W.S. But conversely, this encirclement is too sloppy for them. They’re acting like wild animals."
"It's abnormal even for an army—what's going on? What is that pillar of light?"

Chaos looked down with a darkened face.
"—I don't know. Anyway, let's release the emergency identification signal. We can't be destroyed before we reach our destination."
Chaos tapped the console and input the signal.The next moment, the cockpit was hit by an impact, and more cracks ran across the monitor.

"We should have received the signal—it seems we have no choice but to fight."
Canaan raised the crouching machine. The accumulated rubble rolled off.
"Wait. Something's wrong."
「Don't do it, Canaan. Don't listen to that voice,」Chaos's voice said.
He felt the taste of rusty iron in his mouth.

The impact of bullets exploded on the armor’s surface. Numbers were moving frantically on the HUD. Bizarre images formed discontinuously. Countless children ran around in terror in my head. Realiens devoured each other. Wrapped in a crimson and black vortex, Miltia was dismantled into chaotic non-individuality and dissolved into the universe as a wave of primary colors. A crowd of countless people crammed tightly into his head. Trying to say something, his tongue spasmed and stuck to his palate. A sweet aroma pierced his head, and his stomach heaved. Canaan grabbed his throat and arched his back slightly.

Canaan pressed his fingers to his temples. A much more powerful wave was trying to invade his head.
「This is---could it be?」Chaos's whisper was faintly audible.
Canaan gasped and pulled his hand away. Unnoticed, something like crimson gas had crawled up from his feet. He shook his head and looked again, but there was nothing there. He could feel the back of his neck was unusually hot.
Noise that didn't seem human—wailing/screaming/shrieking/roaring laughter/sobbing/whispering—flooded the cockpit in a torrent.

Communications from the Federal A.M.W.S. was forcibly cut in. It was mixed with a rough noise.Their output was being reaped.Their strength left them, and their arms wouldn't lift.Chaos was still shouting something. Kanan looked at the Federal A.M.W.S. aiming its gun with hollow eyes. Suddenly—a huge shadow leapt out from the side.

A vibrant emerald-green unit swung a greatsword glowing with laser light down at the Federal A.M.W.S. A shockwave rushed towards the E.S. Asher.
The dazed Federal A.M.W.S. was cut in half horizontally by a consecutive side-swipe and exploded.

Kanan shook his dazed head slightly, unable to fully grasp the situation.
A communication came in from the new unit that saved them from their crisis.
"You, unknown unit there. I just received your identification signal. It seems different from the regular one, but can I assume you are an ally?"
"---I see---there seem to be some decent soldiers left."

Kanan glanced sideways at Chaos behind him. He couldn't make a calm decision alone.
"What do we do?"
"We should fight together. Getting through the current situation is the top priority."
"Understood. Send the signal back."

Kanan moved the E.S. Asher next to the new A.M.W.S. who misunderstood it as a hostile action.To avoid being spotted, He lowered the Gatling gun's muzzle and approached as slowly as possible.He checked the current status using the instruments. The output value had recovered to 15%. The machine was gradually but surely regaining its freedom from the invisible pressure.

Again, the man's voice was heard over the communication line.
《I have accepted your identification signal. I will now proceed to eliminate the surrounding Federal Army aircraft》
"Canaan, can you move?"
"I'm fine. I need shield support. The armor damage is too severe. I can't take much more of this."

The E.S. Ashur returned the Federal A.M.W.S.'s gunfire by jumping backward.
It fired the Gatling cannon rapidly toward the two A.M.W.S. positioned on the rooftop of the building overhead. The two machines were hit by this fire, shook violently, and a moment later erupted in flames.
The E.S. Ashur, piloted by Canaan, dodged the subsequent simultaneous firing from four directions with exquisite timing.

"Canaan, behind you!"
Receiving the random Gatling fire unleashed by the E.S. Ashur through the gaps, the surrounding Federal A.M.W.S. units exploded one after another.
As Canan turned around he saw in his peripheral vision the figure of a Federal A.M.W.S. charging while firing its assault rifle.
At that moment, the green A.M.W.S. beside them leaped out and swung its sword horizontally.

The Federal A.M.W.S. was sliced in two at the torso, turning into two explosions in the air and detonating on the street. The blast wave surged onto the monitor.
On the monitor, the red light of a bullet exploded. The enemy machine was visible on the rooftop of a distant building.

The E.S. Asher knelt on one knee, aiming its gatling at the distant Federal A.M.W.S. At the very edge of the range, the spring in the movable part was completely loose. The targeting reticle aiming at the Federal A.M.W.S. It shook like a wild horse. Aiming for the moment the reticle overlapped the enemy, they pulled the trigger and fired the remaining rounds.

The Federal A.M.W.S. recoiled, staggered back two or three steps, fell on its back, and spouted a magnificent flame high into the sky.
Just then, the joint mechanism in the palm finally reached its limit.
Unable to withstand even the impact of the barrel ejecting the shell casings, the E.S. Asher dropped the gatling hand gun.

The waves of static that washed over the monitor suddenly became more intense.
"We did it—it seems," Chaos said, checking the radar site.
The surroundings were full of cracks and noise, making visual confirmation almost impossible.
Canaan exhaled and opened the cockpit hatch.
Damp air flowed into the narrow space.
Other than the emerald-green machine, no Federal A.M.W.S. units were in sight. A strangely sensual odor hung in the scene of the dead city.

He jumped down onto the road from the cockpit installed in the machine's head. The impact of the landing sent a sharp pain through his entire body. His muscle fibers were probably torn throughout. He considered intentionally blocking his nerves, but dulling his reaction to external stimuli with anesthetic treatment was not a good idea right now. He just had to endure the pain.

The ghost-like pillars of light gradually thinned and were about to disappear into the night's darkness. Canaan and Chaos watched the scene in silence, side by side.
Beside the Asher, the emerald-green machine collapsed onto its knees. The armor was already full of scratches. It seemed to have gone through a considerably fierce battle to get to this point.

The cockpit in the head opened, and a man in a Federal combat uniform appeared. A long weapon was visible tucked into his waist. It was an unusual weapon, but there was a weapon that matched Canaan's database: a bladed weapon called a "katana".
The man stood well composed on the shoulder armor of the A.M.W.S., looking down at the two through the full-helmet visor.
"Look out---" Chaos shouted, and Canaan gasped.

A Federal A.M.W.S. was closing in from behind the male pilot's machine. The steel giant spread its legs and raised a huge club high.
However, the pilot didn't flinch. He tilted his head slightly, and reached for the sword at his waist.
The white light trail extending from his hand seemed to vertically sweep the space in an instant.

The Federal A.M.W.S. stopped with its club raised high.
A line ran straight from the dome-shaped top of its head to its crotch.
The enemy machine slowly split into two, crashed to the ground with an earth-shattering roar, and rolled over.
An explosion erupted, and a heat wave rushed in. Canaan and Chaos covered their faces with their arms. The smell of burning hair stung their noses.

Clouds coiled in the dim sky, and thunder roared. The warm wind was heavy with moisture. A red-black vortex-like shape could be glimpsed between the clouds. A premonition of a storm lurked in the dim silence.

Giant collapsed billboards stood everywhere. In the image on one particularly huge billboard, a woman in lingerie, as huge as an A.M.W.S., was impaled diagonally into the ground. An earth-shattering roar that seemed to shake the planet itself occasionally boomed, and the billboard shook violently. The time remaining for Miltia was ticking away.

The access situation to the U.M.N. from the E.S. Asher still showed no signs of recovery. Trying to find those U.R.T.V.s from within this city, which had become a maze without backup, felt like a daunting task.
Canaan watched the two figures deep in conversation.

The man introduced himself as Jin Uzuki. Federal Forces affiliated, rank: Captain. He said that during a descent operation, his unit was attacked by U-TIC organization troops, and the unit he commanded was lost.

When he took off his helmet, his flowing black long hair spilled over his shoulders. He gave an impression that was a little too gentle for a field commander. His demeanor was also strangely gentlemanly, or perhaps philosophical, not very soldier-like.

Having disembarked from the A.M.W.S., Captain Uzuki said with hardly a greeting:
"Mr. Chaos, and you said you were with Mr. Canaan, right? It's dangerous here. If that unit of yours can still move, you should leave here right now."
So the Captain looked up at the battered E.S. Asher.
"I understand that you both have deep circumstances for being here. Even so, all circumstances aside, you need to leave here as soon as possible. This is a place where people stop being people."
"Stop being people...?"

Chaos's eyes filled with anxiety. The Captain did not answer that question.
"The danger isn't just the armed U-TIC organization. All the phenomena on this planet are being caused by what's newly connected above. We were trying to cause a situation that no one could imagine. I wanted as many people as possible to remember what had happened here on Miltia, survive, and pass it on to the future."
It was an exaggerated way of speaking. It was like a line from a person who was about to die.

"We also have a mission. We can't return until it's completed."
The captain frowned slightly and sighed in resignation.
"I see. I would have liked to stop you if possible - but I can't be too leisurely either. I have to go now."
Chaos called out to Captain Utsuki, who had started walking in the rain.
"Captain! Wait a minute. You know, don't you? Where the U.R.T.V. unit is currently deployed?"

"Stop it," Canaan interrupted Chaos.
"Canaan, we should trust him here. The condition of the E.S. Asher is terrible. I think it'll be difficult for us to complete the mission alone."
Captain Utsuki didn't turn around, and remained standing still. Eventually, he said with a mumble.

"U.R.T.V. - are you talking about that unit that is said to be holding the anti-U-Do-retrovirus?"
"We are the ones who were asked to protect them by General Helmer. If you know, please tell us."
A transmission was emitted, Canaan received it.
"Currently, UMN is unreliable, so please memorize the terrain directly with your eyes. Later, if you transfer it to your unit's system, it'll fly you to the site on autopilot."

Canaan looked up at the unit.
The waterproofing was perfect, so there was no worry about the instruments breaking. The E.S. series' initialization was robust, so it probably wouldn't be stolen even if it was left here.

" Take this," Captain Uzuki tossed a portable computer into the air.
Rainwater flowing into the open cockpit ran down the chest armor, forming a small waterfall.
The Captain motioned to the E.S. Asher with his chin.
"However, you'll have to leave that unit behind."

A heavy rain began to fall with a roar.
Wet black hair clung tightly to the haggard cheeks of Captain Jin Uzuki.
Captain Uzuki looked back.
"Very well. This is fate as well. I will accompany you to that place."
Thunder rumbled. Feeling raindrops on his nose, Canaan looked up at the lightning-flashed sky.
"Will you not?"
"Don't want to be seen with me--is that it?"

Yes. He didn't want to stand out as much as possible until he reached my destination. He was planning on ditching his unit halfway through. He wouldn't fall behind in a solo battle, but being swarmed was a pain. There were some people he preferred not to be found by.
"Are you saying I should map it myself?"
Kanan stood up, a terrain seeker in one hand.
"I'm not a close combat type, but whatever. I'll humor you."

He extended a cable and inserted it into the socket at the back of his head. Kanan's visual information began to flow into the portable computer. The seeker activated, making a pleasant sound. The construction of a city of numbers began on the machine.
"If you're too exhausted, Kanan can wait here with the E.S. Asher," said Chaos.
Kanan shook his head.
"I can't do that. It's dangerous to leave you and that man alone."
"Suit yourself," Captain Utsugi said with a smile.

A sound like a balloon bursting was heard. Looking up, the woman had disappeared from the billboard image, which had become a pitch-black board. Falling rain dripped down its black surface.

The rain gradually intensified.
Due to the heavy rain, the collapse of the city began everywhere. The collapse of buildings and roads made the terrain complex, and the city became a maze.
The three people pushed through the rubble. Just by walking, cracks spread, their footing became unstable, and a sense of crisis—that they might be caught in the collapse at any moment—accompanied them. There were also several places where they had to jump several meters to advance.

Along the way, the captain sporadically spoke about himself.
"This job—like you all, was assigned to me by a special appointment from Major General Helmer. I was investigating internally, including the top level of the general staff, for several years. Because of the nature of the matter, it was necessary to proceed with a reliable investigation. But everything was in vain. In the end, my power was insufficient to stop this situation."
Disappointment and a deathly pallor floated across the captain's expression, dripping with rainwater.

"At the point when I couldn't prevent this situation, my fight ended in defeat. I am a person who deserves to perish here, along with this planet. However, even so, I cannot die yet. That’ss not even allowed. I still have things I must do..."
Even as the conversation continued, the collapse progressed, and the cityscape became a devastating mountain of rubble with collapsed buildings piled up in black and blue.

Captain Utsuki stopped, raised one hand, and blocked their path.
Following the captain's gaze, I looked up at the sky and saw the mobile gun batteries they had witnessed earlier moving in groups between the buildings.
"Stay still. They react to movement."
"Aside from the drones, we hardly see any U-TIC Institution personnel. Is there a specific place where they are gathering?" Kanan asked.

"The Federal Army wasn't just sitting around. The drop operation seems to have succeeded locally, and the suppression is probably mostly over. Besides, the survivors are likely preparing to escape this planet," Captain Utsuki shook his head quietly.
"Everything is just as it was planned a long time ago."
Kanan watched the mobile gun batteries disappear behind a building.

"Are you saying this whole war was orchestrated?" Chaos asked.
"Yes, making the U-TIC Institution, no, the entire Miltia region a scapegoat. The Raelian runaway incidents currently occurring across the Federation are just minor triggers for that."
"...nothing else."

"Who exactly is doing this, and for what purpose?"
"There is the shadow of a huge force behind this conflict. There is no doubt that the U-TIC organization is their cover. That force intended to perfect a certain data set through the conflict between the Federation and this Miltia airspace—that is, the Y Data."
"The Y Data—?" Chaos repeated blankly.
The Captain nodded slightly.

"I seized a data disk from a certain man. Although fragmented, the analysis revealed that various data obtained from all phenomena are converging in one area. That is the singular region described as the Y Data—meaning, all of this..." The Captain looked around the collapsing ruins. "...is a sacrifice for the Y Data."
"What exactly does that Y Data mean?" Canaan asked from the side.
"The details are unknown. However, humanity has sought what lies beyond that data for a long time. It is a path. A description of the path to reach the mysteries of the universe."

"I don't understand the meaning. It seems I just can't get used to human ways of talking, thinking, or doing things."
Canaan shrugged slightly and rubbed the wet computer display against his clothes.
Sensing a presence ahead, tension ran through the group.
Seven or eight meters ahead on the road, one of those mobile artillery units was floating at a relative altitude of about three meters.

On a conical base reminiscent of a five-meter-diameter flower petal, a disk was rotating languidly. Cylinders grew densely around its periphery. A red light was blinking at the tip of the cylinder; this was likely the sensor. The red light stared vaguely at its surroundings.
Captain Utuski placed a hand on the sword at his waist. The drawn blade peeking from the scabbard held a wet light for about two centimeters.

Chaos warned in a low voice. "Captain, don't move. Leave this to me. If we make a big fuss here, we'll summon this one's companions."
Chaos stared quietly at the mobile artillery.

"What are you going to do?"
Instead of answering Canaan, Chaos began walking toward the artillery unit as if completely unconcerned.
The artillery unit's red eyes captured Chaos's movement and blinked.

《O countless flows of matter, O pitiful playing bondsmen. Gather and return, assemble, and release a glimpse of my power.》
As he walked, Chaos chanted a strange phrase in his mouth.
Along with the sound of a motor mixing with the sound of rain, the upper hatch opened like peeling petals. A pale blue laser light began to gather around the hatch.
If someone were shot by a laser of that scale, a human might easily die instantly.

<seat to seat—>
Stopping directly beneath the emplacement, Chaos raised one hand overhead and shouted.
Chaos's hand, raised in the air, flashed brightly for an instant in the dark street.
The outline of the mobile artillery wavered like a heat haze. The artillery trembled once as if resisting.

Then, something Canaan couldn't understand happened. Its existence unraveled in the air like smoke blown by the wind. The street was illuminated with a mid-day light for a moment, and then became dark again immediately. Now the artillery was a small particle of light fluttering down. The particles twinkled in front of Chaos and completely vanished from this world.

Captain Utsuki took his hand off the scabbard and looked at the retreating figure of Chaos, who stood quietly as if mourning the vanished artillery. The Captain and Canaan looked at each other with perplexed faces. "A power I've never seen before, truly mysterious. Who exactly is your partner?"

Canaan forcibly chased the feeling of awe that welled up in his heart from his mind.
"He's not my partner. He was just forced on me by Helmer before we dropped here. I don't know who he is either."
"Speak for yourself."
"I see, General Helmer, still has a taste for unusual personnel."
"I'm hurt. I can't deviate wildly like you guys. I'm a custom-made product, but I've passed regular checks."

Chaos turned back to the two of them. His green amber eyes showed no special emotion or lingering scent of mystery. He was just wearing the calm smile that they were getting used to seeing.

Canaan passed silently by Chaos's side and walked to the edge of the high-speed road. The silhouette of the central tower extended to the U-TIC organization headquarters Labyrinthos. The overlapping buildings. The scattered city. Like lives left behind extinguished, the lights went out one by one.

He thought he had walked quite a distance after getting off the E.S. Asher, but the scenery had hardly changed. There was just a messy ruin stretching endlessly as always. The city was blackened by rain. Thunder that sounded like tearing boards raced across the sky. It was the sound of the city breaking down. The ghosts of the clamor——.

The portable computer in Canaan's hand emitted a pleasant whirring sound. All the scenery Canaan saw was converted into a cool world connected by coordinate points in rhythm. A silent cemetery of a dying civilization. Once the past was stripped away, the tombstone was just a stone waiting to weather away.

The three of them slid down the collapsed road that had become a steep slope with force. The slope was slippery with rain, and they had to put all their strength into their bodies so as not to roll all the way down at once.
After proceeding through the magnificent ruins for about five minutes, they came to a tunnel about ten meters wide.

The tunnel was a horizontal trapezoid, and the ceiling was quite high. The inside was relatively bright with orange lighting. There were traces of accidents where cars had crashed into the walls here and there.

Suddenly the tunnel ended, and the view opened up. Canaan and the others finally arrived at the central tower Labyrinthos which pierced the sky.
It was the headquarters of the U-TIC organization, built at the request of Joachim Mizrahi, the leading authority on Zohar research.

I hear that the structure <Haerhal[7]> is enshrined in the lowest basement floor. The area near the spire was unnaturally quiet in the storm. Wind and rain lashed violently against Canaan. Lightning flashed in the dark clouds, and thunder roared.

[7] I don't know what this name is supposed to be, I've never played past where this book ends.

"The guide seems to end here. The URTV, units should currently be deployed in the lower depths ahead——"
The captain's voice echoed loudly inside the tunnel.

"Jin, That’s your name right? Thanks for your cooperation so far," Canaan said.
In front of the spires of Labyrinthos, a strangely disproportionately large statue is visible to the right. A powerful presence swirled at its base, as if a fierce beast ready to attack was lurking there.
Jin took a step into the pouring rain and stopped.

A tension not felt until now seeped from behind Jin's back.
"No, please don't worry about it. More than that, I'm truly sorry I couldn't assist you all." Jin took a single disk from the pocket of his battle uniform. Water droplets on the glowing disks surface changed into seven colors.
"However, I must somehow supplement the data on this disk and clarify the background of this conflict. To do that, I need to directly approach the main frame here. And—"

The captain's words were interrupted by a thunderclap. A flash of light painted their field of vision white.
The statue, struck directly by lightning, was half-destroyed, significantly gouged from one arm to its chest. Debris scattered down from its torso.
—Was that a human?

Canaan narrowed his eyes and looked at the person standing at the base of the half-destroyed statue.
Rain was falling, and a man stood silently.
Underneath his reddish-purple hair, neatly slicked back, was a deeply carved, wild face. Clad in a black military uniform, a wide military sword was at his waist. His purple eyes, like those of a bird of prey, stared sharply and calmly at the three people.

The man leaped from the statue's pedestal and landed smoothly on the street. He chuckled with a rusty voice.
"I had my suspicions, but I didn't think you'd actually show up again—I was half impressed that you might have the talent of a petty thief, but it seems I was mistaken. I have no respect for the courage of a flea."
"The colonel's lonely face came to mind, you see. I came back to see him one last time before leaving."

The man wore a cynical smile. A fighting spirit, filled with an intense will that transcended good and evil, erupted from his body.
"Hmph, still as mouthy as ever, Utsuki. And still bad at bluffing. That pale face of yours suits your thin nerves perfectly."

Placing one hand on the hilt of his sword, the man walked calmly forward.
"Did you really believe that one measly piece of data you stole would shake the great cathedral of our just cause even slightly? You skinny dog with your tail between your legs!"
"I returned to finish what I started. And you, you're the one...
Why did you come all this way to meet me yourself?"

Jin reached for the sword at his waist. He grabbed the hilt and glared at the man.
"Colonel, I'm coming through. I have business beyond here."
The expression suddenly disappeared from the Colonel's face.

He looked up at the sky, letting the ink-like raindrops hit his cheeks.
"My coming all this way to cut you down will probably be the last folly I allow myself. I will end that life before it even feels pain, abandon my ties forever, and send your blood and flesh scattering grandly as a farewell gift to that old man. From here on, even a single boring emotion will be an unnecessary stain."

The man rolled his shoulders, cracking his bones. He seemed to grow a size larger as his muscles swelled. The sheathed sword in his hand emitted a white light.
"This is the end! Utsuki!"
Simultaneously with the shout, the man's body was no longer in that place.

The man's black afterimage remained on Canaan's retina.
Rhythm of breathing, causing an optical illusion in the optic nerve at a special timing.
——Where was he?
Canaan hurriedly looked left and right for the man's figure.
"Stay back! No, forward——" Jin's voice.

Canaan and Chaos were collectively pushed away by the Captain.
A black mass raced past their side. At the same time, Jin leaped backward. A hurricane-like blow assaulted the Captain.
The rigid sword grazed Jin's head, gouged the wall, and scattered debris. A crack ran in a straight line along the tunnel wall. That immense destructive power—just touching it would likely have blown away a living person's limbs.

Colonel Mizushibuki raised his sword overhead and unleashed the next blow. Jin rolled sideways to dodge it and tumbled out of the tunnel. He ran along the road, kicking up water splashes. The Colonel kicked off the ground, leaped, and closed the distance with Jin.

From mid-air, the Colonel unleashed a diagonal slash. Jin instantly drew his sword and stopped it just short. The two glared at each other with their swords locked together. "Weak! With your petty sword techniques, you won't even reach my bones, let alone my soul!"

The Colonel pushed with all his might, and Jin's face, receiving the blow, twisted in pain.Jin's body unexpectedly sank. A downward slash from below swept the stumbling Colonel, who had lost his balance.

The Colonel arched his back, rebalanced himself while staggering, and then deflected the continuation of Jin's thrusting sword to his side.
A fierce battle cry ripped through the air. This time, Jin deflected the Colonel's lunging attack upward.

Jin kicked the ground, kicked the wall, and leaped over the railing to disappear onto the rooftop of the Labyrinth Central Tower. The Colonel, who had watched him go, turned his neck, looked at Canaan and Chaos, and let out a snort. The Colonel followed Jin, they vanished onto the rooftop in a single bound.

Canaan tapped his temple with a fingertip.
"What is going on? Do I have to rewrite my data on human physical abilities?"
"Let's go, Canaan."
Chaos said. He dashed toward the slope leading up to the roof.

The fight between the two, having moved locations, intensified further. Two shadows flew across the rooftop lined with columns, like an ancient temple.
The difference in the quality of their swords might have been, if one were to point it out, a difference in their orientation toward destruction. The Colonel's sword was mindless. Like a natural disaster, it naturally mowed down and destroyed everything that touched its blade.

On the other hand, Jin's swordsmanship was focused purely on cutting down the man in front of him.
One could not cut a storm.

Occasionally, a flash that would wake Jin's eyes threatened the Colonel, but the battle continued at a pace where Jin somehow managed to fend off the Colonel's fierce attacks from beginning to end.
"Canaan, the E.S. Asher—"
"Ah, I already called them."

The terrain data and activation key in the portable computer had been transferred. However, it would probably take more than ten minutes for the E.S. Asher to activate, map and reproduce the data, measure the coordinates, and fly here. By that time, naturally, this ultra-high-speed close combat would be over.
Canaan calmly analyzed the situation.

There was a possibility that the signal sent just now, dragged by the U.M.N.'s modulation, flew in a completely random direction. Or the E.S. Asher's mapping and reproduction could fail. In the worst case, the E.S. Asher might mistake them for dead crew members, leave them behind at the bottom of this hell's cauldron, and return to the mothership.

If Lieutenant Utsuki was defeated, that man—the Colonel—would surely aim for Canaan and the others next. They would likely not win in hand-to-hand combat.

Thinking about the operation, they should have gotten as far away as possible and waited for the E.S. Asher's arrival, or since they knew the way, made up their mind to go back the way they came.

In any case, they should have abandoned Jin and fled.
However, Canaan's feet somehow would not move.
The fight tilted in the Colonel's favor, and Jin was cornered, his back against one of the pillars.

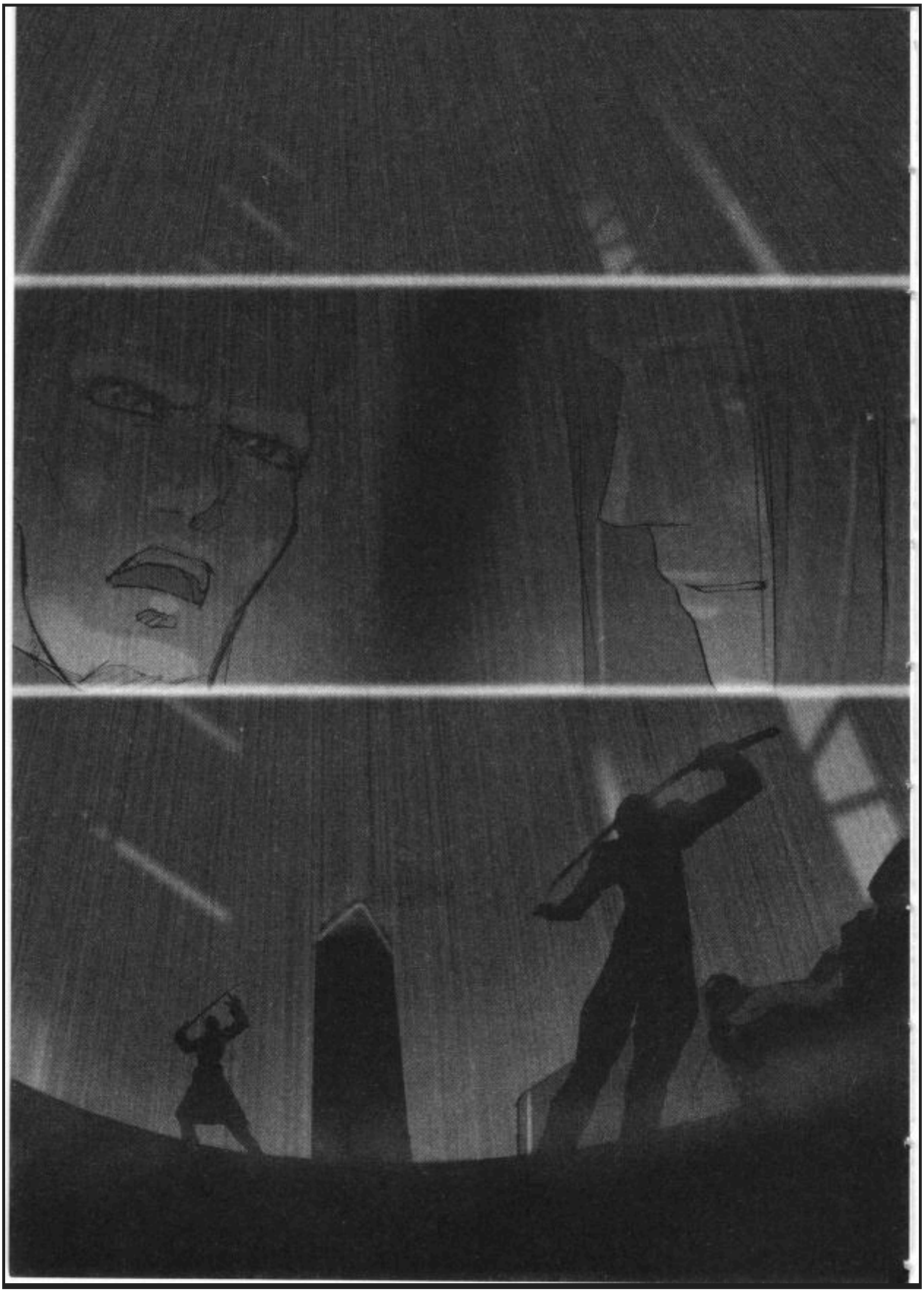
The Colonel kicked off the ground and swept through the space where Jin's head had been a moment before. The Colonel's sword gouged the pillar and scattered Jin's hair. Jin ducked in the nick of time and swept at the Colonel's feet with his sword; the Colonel jumped backward to evade. The Colonel's sword deflected Jin's follow-up slash.

The Colonel, riding that momentum, struck Jin's cheek with his swinging left fist. Scattering water droplets, Jin crashed into the pillar, his sword dangling powerlessly from his hand.

The Colonel rushed at the coughing Jin like a black mass.
Jin looked up, dodged sideways, and rolled on the ground.
The pillar swayed precariously and slowly started to fall toward the Colonel.
"Whoa!" The Colonel recoiled, leaping backward.
The fallen giant pillar dug into the rooftop, scattering water droplets and rubble into the air. Black, spiderweb-like cracks ran across the entire surface of the roof.

The ground beneath them tilted precariously, and Canaan instinctively clung to the railing."Captain Utsuki!"
Jin remained lying face down and didn't move. Chaos rushed over to Jin and lifted him up.

A considerable amount of blood was seeping from Jin's side. Chaos's hand glowed and traced the wound.
Jin let out a faint groan of pain. Chaos shook his head



"No good—the wound is too deep. It won't close completely."
Canaan glared at the Colonel from the handrail. The Colonel narrowed his eyes and stared back at the three of them. "A pathetic sight, Utsuki, being saved by a small fry. Though, I knew how it would turn out when that half-wit tried to act tough."

The Colonel slashed the air with his sword. Jin was breathing heavily. He pulled Chaos, who was supporting him, away and nodded. "I'm fine— it’s just a scratch, as they say." Contrary to his words, the Captain's face was drained of color. He turned his face away and walked a few staggering steps towards the Colonel.

A roar continued from underground. The black cracks on the rooftop surface deepened and widened further. Their footing became unstable. At any moment, the entire building could collapse and swallow the four of them whole. Still, Canaan could not bring himself to make the decision to flee from there.
Chaos, with his wet silver hair stuck to his cheek, silently watched the two facing each other.

The surrounding buildings shook in small tremors, their outer shells peeling away one after another. The Colonel let the hand gripping his sword fall to his side and calmly looked up at the sky swirling with black clouds.
"Staying any longer is meaningless," the Colonel pointed his sword straight at Jin. "... I guess it's time to sever our relationship."
Jin held his sword reversed, placed his finger along the blade, and stared straight at the Colonel.
"Oh, to try and face me even with those injuries. Are you only good for struggling in vain?"
"You never know until you try, Colonel," Jin said in a strangely calm voice.
"You're full of excuses—" the Colonel spat out.

The next moment, light burst from their bodies and collided in the middle of the straight line. Crimson erupted from the Colonel's body, and blue from Jin's. Expanding and contracting, the two energy lights swirled, trying to swallow each other whole. Waves of light intersected. The vibration transmitted to the rooftop became even more intense, and the cracks branched out into several more lines.

"It's collapsing!" Canaan grabbed Chaos's arm.
Chaos stood rooted to the spot, still being shaken by Canaan. The light intensified further, brilliantly illuminating the darkness. The vast appearance of the rain-soaked city cast deep shadows within the light. The red and blue vortex of light greedily

swallowed the bodies of the Colonel and Jin, and a violent shockwave pierced the atmosphere.

Abruptly, the rooftop was enveloped in silence. Canaan opened his narrowed eyes. The Colonel and Jin stood still, in the same posture as before the light battle had begun. Canaan and Chaos watched the retreating figure of Jin, holding their breath. The strength suddenly left his body, and Jin fell to the ground with a sound, collapsing on the spot.

The Colonel hung his sword powerlessly, breathing roughly. "Utsuki, your skill is only that much after all. You understand now that I am superior in both technique and strength, right? Hmph, and that old man..."

A deep, straight laceration ran from the Colonel's right cheek to his temple, and blood spurted like a fountain with each breath he took in his excitement of victory. Canaan heard something cracking finely from under his feet. He followed the crack with his eyes and noticed the countless fractures concentrating on the ground where the Colonel stood. Jin's target had not been the Colonel; he had concentrated the damage on the ground beneath him.

The next moment, the spiderweb-like cracks centered around the Colonel bulged greatly, swallowing him in a roar of rubble. A large part of the rooftop collapsed, involving the floors below one after another in its destruction. Canaan grasped the handrail with one hand and Chaos's arm with the other, watching the figure of the Colonel being swallowed by the collapse.

The shaking subsided, and Canaan slowly let go of the handrail. The rooftop was enveloped in a moment of silence. About one-third of the rooftop had collapsed, and the bottom of the abyss was black and out of sight. Jin lay on the edge of the large hole. When Canaan and Chaos rushed over, Jin coughed slightly, opened his eyes faintly, and smiled somehow.

Before long, the rain stopped. The black clouds that completely covered the city's sky, however, didn’t even try to leave. A faint, dark light of destruction outlined the silhouette of the ruins. Canaan stared at Jin. Jin, who appeared exhausted after the fight with the Colonel, stood up on his own after a short rest.

Canaan was inwardly amazed at how much tougher he was than he looked, despite his injuries.

Jin stood on the edge of the hole in the rooftop, gazing into the depths where the Colonel had disappeared. The Colonel was likely dead, swallowed into the distant depths.

The roar from below grew stronger, as if reflecting the Colonel's resentment.
Canaan noticed an alert sound from his portable computer. It was a whistle from the E.S. Asher. Canaan followed the dim sky and looked in the direction the aircraft was flying from.

Jin walked over to Canaan with a dark expression.
"Unfortunately, there is no more time. We have no choice but to give up on supplementing this data—for now." Jin then looked at Canaan’s face, with a look of having just thought of something. "Canaan, I have a favor to ask."

Jin took out a data disk he had hidden in his chest pocket. Canaan immediately understood what he wanted to say. His performance as a memory element enhancement type Realien had already been explained. If the amount could fit on a disk of that size, it would probably be possible to save it entirely in his brain.
Canaan reluctantly accepted the data disk. He pulled the socket out of the terrain seeker and inserted the disk instead.

The disk made a light sound, and numbers flowed into his head. There were no physical symptoms. The data transfer was completed in about three minutes.
Then, Jin took the disk back from Canaan and threw it like a frisbee into the valley of collapsing buildings below. The disk spun at high speed and disappeared into the bottom of the valley, forever retiring into the depths of destruction. After that was done,

Jin finally looked relieved and his expression softened slightly.
"Now that I think about it, meeting you all was my good fortune. This way is far safer than having it as a mere object."
Chaos, who had been watching the state of the city, came back and asked, "What are you going to do now, Captain?"

The Captain thought for a moment, then eventually firmed his resolve. "I still have somewhere I must go."
Canaan and Chaos looked at each other. Even as they spoke, the city's destruction was progressing. Miltia seemed to have less than an hour left.
"Now? In that condition, it's too dangerous. The E.S. Asher can carry two or three more people even if they're not regular crew members. Captain, you can join us..."

"This is atonement for me. I can’t refuse to go."
"But!"
To the flustered Chaos, Jin spoke in a calm manner. "I really want you all to return alive. And someday, I want you to bring to light the true nature of this conflict hidden within that data." Jin smiled faintly and looked at Chaos. Next, he tapped his temple for Canaan to see. "I'm counting on you for the data."
"—Understood," Canaan nodded.

Jin gazed at the faces of the two and, looking lonely, gave a bow. "Well then, take care. I pray that you safely accomplish your mission."
Jin's body floated lightly into the air. Spreading his limbs wide, he kicked off wall after wall to soften the impact of landing as he vanished into the darkness of the collapsing city. As expected of a living human, his reflexes were unbelievable. Dark clouds were flowing. The flicker of war was already barely visible. The ground rumbles grew even louder.

The gears of the universe were turning without people knowing. Canaan felt a terribly heavy pressure from the data he had casually taken into his head. A damp wind crossed the dying cityscape covered in a blue light. Chaos was staring into the darkness where Jin had disappeared.

Canaan called out to him. "Let's go. This building is dangerous. We'll wait for E.S. Asher in a more stable place."
Canaan, who had started to turn back, was stopped by Chaos's scream. "Wait. Look, Canaan. Look at that!"

Canaan turned around in astonishment and looked up at the sky where Chaos was pointing. The sky was covered by a giant shadow. Canaan's eyes widened in surprise. The giant black shadow enveloped the two of them. And then, a familiar noise spread through his head. Impatience and resignation throbbed in his fading consciousness. He had failed again.

The electronic sound of the Encephalon cutting out and a familiar voice was heard in his ears. <Well, well. Congratulations Canaan. That makes it your 127th loss. Another record broken, you could say.>

Canaan rubbed his eyes on the bed and checked his surroundings. It was a small room packed with equipment. For a moment, his recognition drifted aimlessly through the world, but soon, it firmly landed in this place, fourteen years after the Encephalon

dive. It was a room in the Second Miltia City Hall, where he had repeated Encephalon dives many times.

The operator next to the terminal smiled towards Canaan. Canaan let out a small sigh. The representative's office was known for its view overlooking the Second Miltia city. There were only two people in this vast room. One was Canaan, and the other was Helmer, who served as the representative of the Second Miltia autonomous government.

Helmer stood in front of a massive desk, his posture even broader and thicker than in his military days. For Canaan, performing an Encephalon dive at this city hall had become almost a routine. It was a memory retrieval and cleansing operation to analyze data entrusted to him by Jin Uzuki, but due to the strange disconnection phenomenon, they still couldn't reach that memory.

"I see. That's unfortunate, but it can't be helped," Helmer said upon receiving Canaan's report. Despite having handled grueling work, there was no sign of fatigue on Helmer. He continued in a clear, resonant voice. "I'll request the video materials myself later. There might be some new discoveries. Even so, to make an Encephalon subject report. Every time, the results are the same…"

[Helmer]: ...They keep saying they don't know what's going on, they seem demotivated. We might need to tighten up the department again.
Canaan shrugged.
[Canaan]: Don't worry about it. Today is the birthday of the child of the person in charge. I don't really understand, but it must be a significant anniversary in human customs, right?
Helmer looked back, his face breaking into a smile. [Helmer]: Well, yes. I don't have children, but if I can call this city my child, then as I get older, I remember the time I've accumulated. It’s an indescribable feeling, well— I think of it as the joy of existence.
[Canaan]: We just got through a crisis. Aren't you tired too? I heard that being sentimental is one of the necessary mental care routines for humans. It might be good to relax a little.
[Helmer]: That's not possible. The situation is still moving. We haven't gotten through all the crises yet. You could even say it's just begun.

Canaan gazed at the cityscape of Second Miltia spreading out behind Helmer. Helmer left the window and sat down at his desk. He returned to a serious face and looked at Canaan.

"So, what was your actual feeling? Was it completely unchanged from the 126 Encephalon Dives you've done so far?"
"Unfortunately. Changes in the details occur as usual. However, that is within the U.M.N.'s correction error range. The general outline was exactly the same."
"Well, that's fine," Helmer grunted.

"A turning point will come naturally eventually. We have to work patiently. However, it is still a strange thing. The information that we know is certainly there, but we just can't retrieve it."
"If we can just figure out the true identity of that black shadow that appears just before the 'lost' state, we can probably go deeper," Canaan sighed lightly and touched the back of his head.

"--The truth behind the Miltia conflict, huh?"
"It's background information on the mysterious organization that swallowed up the old Miltia. It's a truth we absolutely must reach. Why did we lose our home planet?"
Canaan suddenly remembered the face of the man he saw in Encephalon. "Speaking of which, is that man--Jin Uzuki--still alive?"

Helmer leaned back comfortably in his chair. "Ah, he's doing well. He's left the military now and is enjoying a secluded life."
"Everyone lost a lot in that conflict," Helmer closed his eyes. "I think he probably wanted to perish with that planet--if he hadn't been given a future of raising his sister, he might have actually done so."
"That man had a sister?" Canaan was slightly surprised.
"Ah, Shion Uzuki. Haven't you heard? That girl he brought back is now an excellent researcher at Vector."

Helmer chuckled as he watched Canaan's face. "I heard you were the type to suppress your emotions, but can it be that you actually care about other people?"
Canaan shrugged his shoulders. "Well, yeah. He's the very person who pushed over a decade of trouble onto me. I do care."

Helmer laughed out loud. "Well, you can forget about him for now. More importantly, get an accurate grasp of the current situation. How much do you know about the Y Data?"
"Jin Uzuki said it was what caused that conflict."
"Hmm. It's been thought of as the culmination of Dr. Joachim Mizrahi's Zohar research, but there are rumors it's something more."

Helmer's expression tightened. "Dr. Joachim Mizrahi sealed the Y Data within a certain Realian. The prototype of the Type-100 observation Realian. Its individual code is MOMO."

Helmer operated the panel, showing an image of a pink-haired Realian girl. "This MOMO, however—for some reason, ended up being protected by the Kukai Foundation. It just so happens that she'll arrive in this city on Second Miltia today."

He tapped the panel further, showing Dr. Yuri Mizrahi. Canaan gazed at the photo. "It seems there is a considerable match in facial features between Yuri Mizrahi and the Type 100 prototype, but... is there any relationship between the two of them?"
Helmer nodded. "Yes. Joachim Mizrahi apparently modeled his last work after the appearance of his real daughter, who died young."

Canaan looked away from the image. "So—what exactly is my role?"
"For the time being, I'd like to ask you to be a bodyguard. Representatives from the Foundation will also accompany the Type 100 prototype escort."
"Which ones?" Canaan asked.
"The small one," Helmer grinned.
"Rubedo, is it--" Canaan narrowed his eyes.
"The name is Gainan Kukai now. Does that make you feel nostalgic?"
"Somewhat--he's a chatty fellow."
"Understood," Canaan turned on his heel. He thought of MOMO. Why did people design Realiens in human form? Helmer would probably say it was because they were lonely.

The cathedral was enveloped in silence and twilight. Beneath a giant golden cross stood the Pope, a white-haired man with a sturdy physique.
The woman, Orgulla, approached him. "Your Holiness."
"---Hmm," the Pope did not lift his face from his book.
"I have a report regarding the Y document. The details are for Chief Inquisitor Margulis to convey directly to Your Holiness."

Suddenly, the transparent image of Margulis appeared, kneeling in the hall. Orgulla glanced at him and walked past.
"Enough with the superficial greetings," the Pope's voice sounded like scraping sand. "I hear the Realiens who held the Y data have fallen into the hands of the Kukai Foundation. You have an explanation for this, do you not?"

《Certainly, the Type 100 prototype that held the data is currently protected by the Kukai Foundation. But according to Albedo, the Y data has strong protection... its deactivation is apparently impossible without analysis at the U.M.N. administration bureau in Second Miltia. We have already made our next move.》
"Our fleet is considering an invasion of the demilitarized zone in the near future. I hope you do not disappoint me this time."
(Understood. I shall certainly bring you good news.)

Margulis's image faded. Orgulla stared into the void for a while, then exited the cathedral. She walked down the dark corridor, a smile carved onto her lips as she heard the screaming voices in her head.
"Stand back, Manes," she muttered.

【Chapter 2】Pursuit

Vector Industries <KOS-MOS> Related Documents File Number 026643

The document was an outline of a report created post-facto based on the submitter's subjective perspective. It followed requests from various investigation committees established within Vector Industries to clarify the series of events from the Vogelflug assault incident to the Heavenly Ark appearance incident. For details regarding the dates, physical matter, and wave condition records of the various occurrences, the report directs readers to the data link destinations of the investigation committees.

The small fleet, with the cruiser Vogelflug as its flagship, had come under attack by a large horde of Gnosis during the activation experiment and field test of the anti-Gnosis combat android <KOS-MOS>. The cause and progression leading to the appearance of the Gnosis could not be determined by the submitter. It seemed the purpose had been to recover the simulator, but the connection to the attack remained unknown.

At the same time on the same day, Shion Uzuki had just finished a KOS-MOS related simulation program. The fleet had been attacked by the Gnosis and was almost completely destroyed and rendered non-functional in the initial strike. Due to the Gnosis's invasion of the ship, localized battles had unfolded within the vessel. At that time, KOS-MOS had spontaneously started up in her frozen autonomous mode. By activating the onboard ultra-wide Hilbert effect, she had immobilized the Gnosis and continued to purge them within the ship with her armaments.

KOS-MOS, Shion, and Allen Ridgeley, who had escaped from the disabled Woklinde, were subsequently picked up by the cargo ship Elsa, which belonged to the Kukai Foundation. With the cooperation of Captain Matthews, they had decided to head to Second Miltia to transfer KOS-MOS.

While sailing to Miltia, the Elsa protected MOMO, a prototype of the Type 100 observation Realian who was escaping from the U-TIC Institute's headquarters, Pleroma[8], and her guardian cyborg, Zigurat 8. After that, the Elsa merged with the foundation's flagship, the Heddrundar, and MOMO came under the protection of Mr. Gaignun, the representative director of the Kukai Foundation, and his son. However, because of this, they were pursued by the U-TIC Institute and a man named Albedo.

[8] The Pleroma is the home of the Monad in gnosticism.

After this, the Second Miltian government and the Kukai Foundation were besieged by the Federal Fleet, but the various charges raised against them at that time were presumed to have been due to the machinations of the U-TIC organs. The evidence documents submitted to the Federation by Vector Inc. would also prove this.

A person named Albedo, who seemed to be in close cooperation with the U-TIC organization, had persistently targeted MOMO on several occasions. The motive was unknown to the document’s submitter. The critical events of the 'Song of Nephilim' generator and the 'Cathedral Ship' appearing in orbit above Second Miltia had been caused by his hand. In particular, the giant energy plant 'Cathedral Ship' still maintained its output functions from when MOMO was produced. If judgment and action had been delayed, its attack capabilities could have led to the destruction of Second Miltia.

The submitter particularly emphasized that KOS-MOS's voluntary judgment and actions were also essential for avoiding the crisis. For Shion, who had developed the integrated OS, KOS-MOS's movements had felt very out of place. It was thought that the black box portion occupying the central part of KOS-MOS, left by the basic designer Kevin Winnicot, had a great influence. KOS-MOS was still operating autonomously, though her program still had many unstable elements, and it was judged that further improvements were necessary.

The blackout screen on the wall opened, and the view above was dyed bright blue—the sea was visible. The sky and sea seen from the bridge were filled with bright sunlight. The cargo ship Elsa was flying several hundred meters above the sea. The vibration inside the ship was transmitted from underfoot.

The various functions of the Elsa switched to stratospheric specifications. The artificial gravity stopped functioning, and the atmospheric components were updated to match those of the planet Miltia. The back of their ears stung with the change in atmospheric pressure. Jr. looked up at the blue sky from the reinforced glass top plate and took a deep breath. He whistled toward the red bangs falling on his face.

The Elsa's bridge was of average size and structure for a cargo ship of its class. On the captain's seat was Captain Matthews. In the streamlined helmsman's seat at the front was Tony. Slightly behind him sat the navigators Hammer and Chaos.

Chaos, who played the role of a specialist against the Gnosis, stood out as a mysterious presence. He looked like a young man in his late teens, but his appearance had barely changed since they had met fourteen years prior. Jr. kept silent about

Chaos's power to make Gnosis disappear with his bare hands; this was a tactic he had naturally acquired as the representative director of the Kukai Foundation.

"Second Miltia is right around the corner. Once we're here, there won't be any new attacks. Momo, good work," the captain said from above.

"Yes," Momo replied brightly, standing up from her seat and smiling.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm relieved. I'm happy. That everyone arrived safely."

Momo looked with a smile at the man standing like a statue beside her, known as Ziggy. He had infiltrated Pleroma alone to recapture her and had continued to protect her ever since. Ziggy looked down at Momo quietly with clear blue eyes, his expressionless face appearing a little calmer than before.

Jr. walked over to Captain Matthews, his black coat fluttering.

"Are you alright, little master? You look a bit tired," Captain Matthews asked.

"Ah, I'm fine. My body is excited, and my blood is drained, I guess. It was a pretty hard schedule after all."

"Well, if you keep doing such reckless rough stuff, your head will be flooded with enkephalins and endorphins. I am in the role of coordinator for the reckless owner and crew. My stomach acid is gushing out, and my frail stomach feels like it's tearing apart. I wish you'd turn over a little bit of that abundant Foundation budget to me."

"Are you planning to increase the debt again? Your stomach and intestines are made of sake barrels, aren't they?? The droids leaked that the onboard bar is the most expensive department in Elsa. Cocktail make up..."

"What is this an intervention?"

Captain Matthews shrunk his neck and hid his expression.

"I'm still pursuing fuel efficiency, you know—so, what happens now? From here on?"

"Once we land at Second Miltia, the Elsa’s crew will be released for the time being."

"Well, that's a long-awaited vacation," the captain nodded happily.

"But make sure to leave a record somewhere of your whereabouts. Depending on the situation, we might need to move immediately."

"Heh. Roger—"

"So, what about the little master? Transporting Momo is—"

"We will continue to escort Momo to the city hall. It's only right after the military friction between the federal government and the autonomous government. We can't move the military unnecessarily. A limousine should be prepared at the spaceport. We'll transport Momo to the city hall with that."

“ Ok, but will that be alright? What if strange people come out after her again—"

"According to old man Helmer, even after checking U.M.N. and spaceport traffic, there seems to be no trace of unidentified military supplies being brought into Second Miltia."

Jr. noted that there currently seemed to be no shadow of a hostile force on Second Miltia. The captain folded his arms and groaned.

"I see. It seems we can rest easy for now."

"Well, there is a way when the time comes. What bothers me more is Albedo's movement. I don't think he will back down like this. As long as Albedo aims for a re-link with U-DO, he won't give up on Momo easily."

"Is that so? He was soundly defeated, wasn't he? Doesn't the little master actually want to meet this Albedo soon?"

"Don't be stupid. No way."

The captain’s taunt changed Jr.'s expression. He unconsciously pressed his right chest, mistaking the heartbeat of his brother for his own. He told himself he would capture Albedo, but a gruesome urge inside told him to kill him.

The sound of a door opening signaled the entrance of Shion Uzuki and Allen Ridgeley. They had been working on KOS-MOS, who had been damaged in the prior incident.

"Shion, was KOS-MOS okay?" Momo rushed over.

Shion removed her glasses. "Yeah, well, you know. There were various minor malfunctions, but for now, the main frame part seems to be fine."

KOS-MOS stood beyond the door, her red eyes reflecting the bridge.

"I really thought what would become of her," Allen rubbed his eyes and yawned.

Shion looked down at her glasses with a gloomy face. During the voyage, KOS-MOS had moved of her own will many times to save the ship, which perplexed the researchers. As they approached the Vector branch office, Shion became silent.

KOS-MOS walked onto the bridge and stopped, her blue hair sparkling in the sunlight. Jr. also looked at the shining sea surface.

"Um," Allen opened his mouth. "The droids in the passenger rooms said we'll arrive soon."

Jr. pointed to the horizon. "Well, take a look. It's quite a sight."

The horizon revealed a giant city. Shion asked if Jr. was going to drop Momo off immediately upon arrival.

"Yeah, and you guys are going to Vector, right?"

Shion looked at Momo and then at KOS-MOS. "Yes. Can you give me a moment to think? Of course, I want to accompany Momo, but I'm also worried about KOS-MOS. What do you think, KOS-MOS?"

"<I will follow Shion's decision>" the android replied.

"Ms. Shion. Momo is fine, please prioritize KOS-MOS," Momo said with a worried look.

"I'm sorry. I've been overworking this child so much. Maintenance in the adjustment tub is no longer enough. I want to take care of it at the second bureau before a serious breakdown occurs."

Shion put her glasses back on. The captain then shouted to the crew that it was vacation time.

"Yo!" "Aye-sir!"

The hull suddenly tilted and plunged.

"Tony. Don't make the ship dance around just as I say so."

"Seriously, I'm begging you. Tony, it'll confuse the control tower!" Hammer shouted.

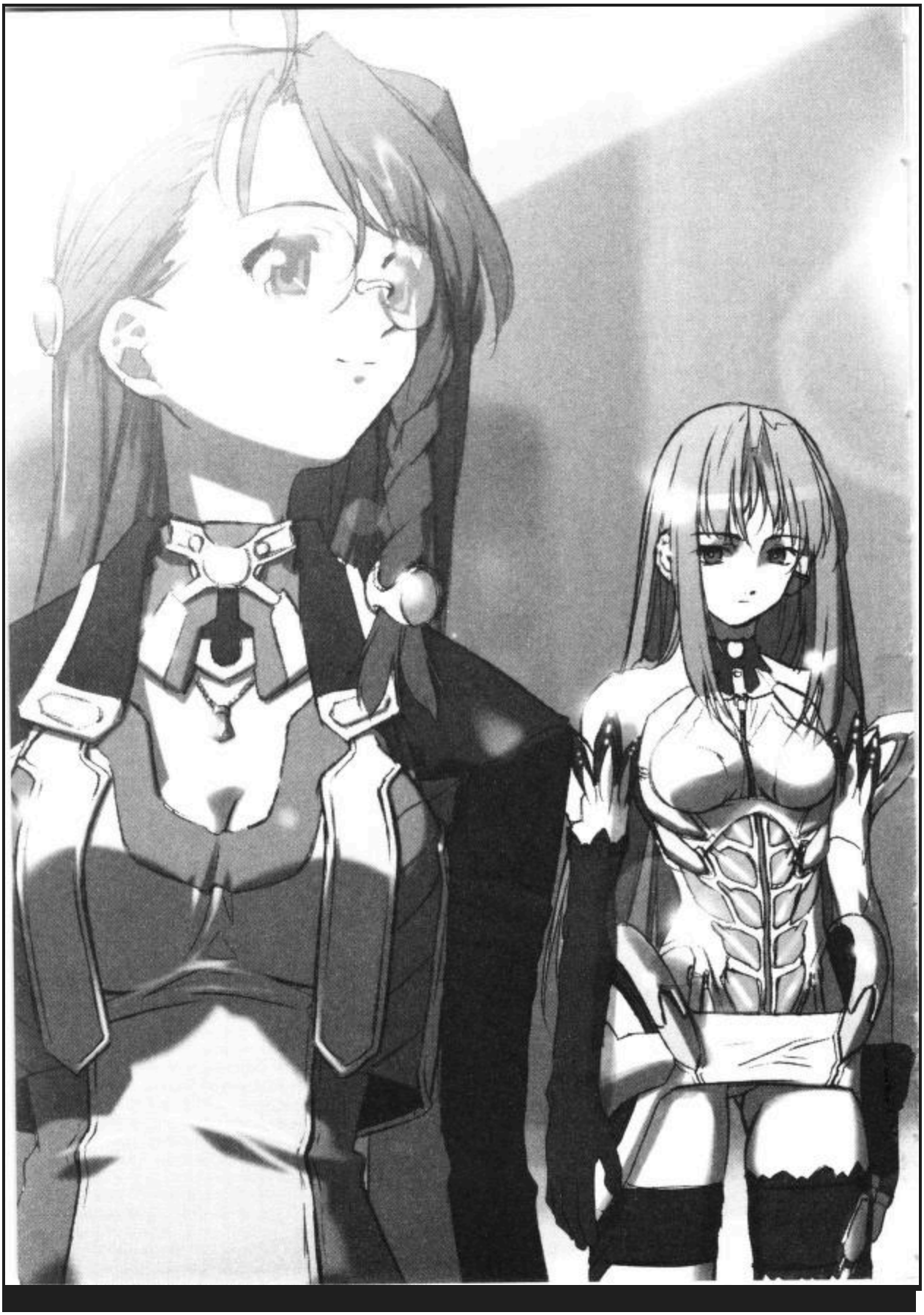
"I know. It's been a while since I landed on a planet, so I just wanted to let this guy play around. Booze, women, and a sunny holiday await me!"

A mechanical voice from the spaceport played over the comms: "<Welcome to Second Militia. This is the Second Militia Spaceport Control Bureau... Registered vessel code 1485.5... Elsa... please proceed with landing operations...>"

"Oh, I caught the runway beacon!" Hammer shouted.

"Everyone get to your stations and brace for the landing shock!"

"I'm the one flying, there's no way there'll be a shock!" Tony shouted back.



As the helmsman had declared, the *Elsa* landed very calmly on Second Miltia. Amid the hustle and bustle of landing, a small incident occurred. Allen Ridgeley, the twenty-four-year-old sub-chief of the Vector First Development Bureau, stepped on and crushed the glasses that Shion Uzuki, the twenty-two-year-old chief of the same bureau, had cherished for many years.

By using material transfer via the U.M.N., various items—from weapons and letters to family members to prizes from quiz shows—could be instantly transferred to other planets. There was almost no waiting time and far fewer accidents than when using cargo ships. However, ships arriving at and departing from spaceports never ceased. This was because only living beings could not be transferred.

Various theories had emerged and disappeared regarding why only living things could not be transferred via the U.M.N. One theory suggested that the kinetic elements living beings possessed were dissipated during the reassembly of matter. Another claimed that life forms inhabiting the U.M.N. interior consumed living beings, while another posited that souls could not be transferred. All of these were merely unprovable, ephemeral theories.

The discussion extended to the Gnosis. These beings, which appeared at first glance to be biological, could enter and exit the U.M.N. far more freely than humans. In the experimental process of biological transfer, many humans had become incapacitated, even more Realiens had become scrap, and countless experimental mice had vanished. Ultimately, humanity had not reached a conclusion. Now, as in the past, people boarded ships, and mice hid in the holds in the old-fashioned way.

Long-distance spaceships communicated with the U.M.N. management office and traveled to their destinations by repeating countless jumps using the address of the U.M.N. pulse called a "Column." For the sailors who had crossed a long journey, the moment they landed brought a deep sense of relief. However, Captain Matthews looked up at the *Elsa* with a bitter face.

"What's this—you want me to open the hangar too?"

A group in green uniforms surrounded the *Elsa*. Captain Matthews did not like the fact that the uniformed officers were touching and peering into everything. Criminal organizations sometimes used ships to smuggle illegal goods that could not be sent overtly via the U.M.N. Because of Momo’s situation, they could not just use the Foundation representative director’s pass that day, as they did not want to make a big fuss. Captain Matthews’ agitation was visibly great; perhaps he really was hiding illegal goods somewhere on the ship.

"Old man Helmer probably tightened up immigration control. Sorry, Captain, we'll go ahead."

"I wish you a safe journey, little master. I'll send you the bill for the U.M.N. usage fee and repairs, so please take care of it—hey, Tony, don't just stand there chatting, come here and teach those rascals how to handle the ship."

When Captain Matthews roared, Tony, who had been persistently bothering a female airport guard, replied with a yawn.

The port held a unique sense of openness that travel brought with it. Due to the activation of Gnosis and the radicalization of U-TIC organization activities, there were far fewer passengers than there once had been. Nevertheless, one often saw travelers on the regular contact ships, group tours, and military personnel heading to new duty stations. The port acted as a kind of filter, changing the traveler from space into a human standing on the ground of the star.

Allen Ridgeley's first words after passing through the welcome gate were: "Ah, it's wonderful to be alive!"

Ultimately, Jr. parted ways with Shion’s group at the exit of the gate.

"Hey, you'll be here for a while, right? Let's hang out after work."

"Of course. I'll show you around, Momo."

Shion seemed to have braced herself by that point, her expression bright as she left. Seeing Allen run after Shion and KOS-MOS, Jr. let out a small sigh. News from space and reports from Second Miltia flowed across the electronic bulletin board, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was almost time for the limousine bound for the city hall to arrive.

"Could you wait a moment?" Ziggy asked. He was looking at an information booth. "I'm going to report the progress to the subcommittee. I hear Dr. Mizrahi has already landed on Miltia. I can pass on a message if you have one."

"Mom is here?" Momo’s eyes sparkled.

"Yes," Ziggy nodded gently.

"Please tell her I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"Okay. I'll tell her."

Ziggy walked towards the booth.

"Let's wait outside, Jr. A limousine might be coming," Chaos urged.

Jr. gazed at Ziggy’s retreating figure. He realized that once the old man delivered Momo, his mission would be over. He wondered if Ziggy planned to go back to the world between life and death. Ziggy’s official status to the subcommittee was "deployed item," a cycle he had repeated for over eighty years. He was awakened at the convenience of others and returned to suspended animation once a mission was fulfilled.

Jr. ran a hand through his red hair and went toward the booth, stopping at the entrance. A holo-monitor was visible over Ziggy’s shoulder. Yuri Mizrahi was on the monitor, neatly dressed in a grape-colored suit.

"Understood. Continue with your mission until the formal handover," Yuri’s businesslike voice said.

Ziggy hesitated for a while and then muttered, "—Doctor Mizrahi." Yuri raised her face on the other side of the monitor.

"————Anything else, Jan Sauer-san?"

Ziggy’s prosthetic body tensed. "Now—I am Ziggurat 8."

"So it seems," Yuri nodded.

"Momo is—happy to meet you."

"Is that so?" Yuri looked down at her documents again.

"I am—" Yuri started to say, then put her hand to her chest and closed her eyes for a moment. Her hand trembled. Her face stiffened with uncontrollable emotions. "I also welcome your arrival."

Yuri’s figure disappeared from the monitor. Ziggy stared at the logo for a while.

"It feels like he's scared, isn't it? Of meeting her," Jr. opened his mouth.

Ziggy glared at Jr. with a sideways glance. "Eavesdropping is not a very admirable hobby."

"Hey, old man. Why don't you upgrade that body of yours to a carbon-based one? I think you could go pretty far if you applied the technology of combat Realiens."

"There's no need to wantonly extend my lifespan," Ziggy replied immediately.

"Momo would be happy if you lived longer, wouldn't she?"

Ziggy shook his head. "No, I'll decline. I have no intention of living long."

"I see. If you change your mind, feel free to call out to me anytime," Jr. said before leaving.

The group boarded a limousine that gently hovered a few dozen centimeters above the ground. It entered the city's artery and accelerated. The vehicle was completely silent, and a yellow lamp indicating automatic driving blinked in the unmanned driver’s seat. The entire ceiling was transparent glass with a black tint. Momo, Ziggy, and Chaos sat in the back seat, while Jr. sat by the window in the front.

Beyond the car window was a highway barrier. The river of hover-mobiles flowed in an orderly fashion. Momo fidgeted for a while before asking: "Ziggy, what did Mom say?"

Ziggy was silent for a moment. "Well. She seemed very busy."

"Just as I thought. She's a woman who supports the Contact Subcommittee. It must be very demanding work."

"That's right. Momo has to work hard so she can support Mom too."

Momo was the last work of Dr. Joachim Mizrahi, a genius of brain physics and Zohar research. He had entrusted all his findings to her. While other Type 100 Realians existed, they never showed the rich emotional expression that Momo did. Jr. could not understand why Joachim Mizrahi had chosen such a fragile vessel for his life's work.

Suddenly, a giant humanoid machine rose up from the blind spot of the highway barrier, running alongside the limousine.

"An enemy?!" Ziggy shouted.

"Damn it, right in the middle of the city?" Jr. glared at the machine, a slender, light-purple A.M.W.S.

"Look ahead!" Chaos pointed forward.

Another A.M.W.S., dark gray and ruggedly armored, flew out in front. It reached down and gripped the limousine, cracking the top glass. Momo screamed.

"Jr., what is this?" Ziggy shielded Momo.

"Albedo!!" Jr. shouted. He quickly scanned the surroundings and drew two pistols. "No, that's not right. That's too gentlemanly for him."

Jr. fired at the A.M.W.S., entrusting his intent to the shockwaves of the bullets. The gray unit tore the upper part of the limousine from the body and tossed it backward. Strong winds rushed into the interior. Jr. stood up on the seat, his coat billowing, and fired continuously.

"Damn, auto won't cut it. Someone drive!" Jr. shouted.

Momo shook off Ziggy's arm. "Ziggy, let me go! Momo will do it!"

She slid into the driver's seat and grabbed the wheel. "Jr.!"

"Okay. Coordinates 2089. Floor it!" Jr. nodded.

The limousine plunged at ultra-high speed through traffic, dodging vehicles. The pursuit continued. The limousine shot through a narrow escape path, and the cluster of destroyed vehicles streamed behind them. They reached a giant tunnel. The gray A.M.W.S. slowed down and watched them enter.

"Alright! We did it!" Jr. stood up and roared.

However, a dark shadow soon fell over his face. Through the lighting glass of the tunnel, the spherical face of the light-purple A.M.W.S. peered down. With a sound that tore through eardrums, glass shards rained down as the aircraft crashed in. The tunnel plunged into chaos.

The A.M.W.S. captured the rear of the vehicle, causing it to tilt sharply. Jr. hit his head against the seat.

"Jr.!" Chaos called out, holding up a fire extinguisher.

Jr. understood the intention. "Alright!"

The fire extinguisher soared into the air, and Jr. fired at it. It exploded, enveloping the A.M.W.S. in white smoke.

"What kind of power does that fire extinguisher have?" Jr. cursed, coughing.

Momo stepped on the accelerator, and the A.M.W.S. let go. The limousine charged toward an archway and bounced down a long flight of stairs, scattering parts as it slid.

Later, Jr. stuck his face out from the corner of an alley. He was soaked from traveling through the underground system. He was certain they had shaken off the machines, but he braced himself for ground forces. He was also worried about Momo, who looked pale.

He saw three soldiers guarding a slope ahead. They wore white coats, helmets, and gas masks, looking inhuman. A helicopter echoed nearby.

"Weren't there supposed to be no enemies?" Jr. cursed inwardly. He exchanged glances with Ziggy. "We don't have time to waste."

"Now is our chance to launch a surprise attack. Three enemies, four of us."

"If it's more than one-on-one, our victory is certain."

Jr. looked back at Momo. "Okay. We'll run through at once. The old man, Chaos, and I will take care of them. In the meantime, Momo, run up that hill to the park."

"Understood. I'll do my best," Momo nodded.

"Let's party," Jr. grinned. He counted down. "Run!"

They charged. "Wait—stop you guys!" the soldiers shouted.

Chaos used an Aether Drive, rewriting the atmosphere to create a wall of fire. The soldiers fled in confusion.

"Momo-chan!" Chaos called out, and she started running.

Ziggy struck a soldier with his mighty arm, sending him flying into the shrubbery. Chaos tossed another soldier's machine gun into the air, where it glowed and disappeared, before striking the man in the abdomen.

"Sorry—" Chaos muttered. The soldier collapsed.

The remaining soldier panicked and chased Momo. Jr. shot him from behind, and he fell. Suddenly, a small helicopter emerged and began firing.

"Whoa! Oh no. Let's run to the park!"

The group ran up the slope as gunfire pursued them.

"Jr., behind you!" Momo shouted.

There was a scorching sensation on the back of Jr.'s head. Suddenly, something like a net wrapped around him from behind, and he rolled onto the slope. An electric current ran from the top of his head to his toes, and he groaned in intense pain. It was a mobile electromagnetic capture net—a weapon that delivered a severe electric shock to a target upon contact and sent an alarm to summon its owner.

"Don't come here! Protect Momo!" he yelled at Ziggy and the others who were running toward him.

Amidst the blaring alarm of the electromagnetic net, Jr. gritted his teeth in pain and removed the net tangled around his limbs.

"Leave it to me!"

The side hatch of the low-hovering helicopter opened, and four or five white soldiers jumped out and started shooting. Jr. returned fire while dragging his body and rolled into a cafe space in a nearby building. The bullets scattered by the helicopter scrapped a vending machine right in front of him. He hid low behind a guardrail as scattered scrap iron made a noise under his feet. Gunfire erupted again, and chiseled architectural materials rained down from above his head.

He stared intently at the guns in both hands, heightening the image for attack. Power welled up and flowed through his arms into the weapons. At the same time, the roar and wind pressure caused by the helicopter increased even more. He leaned over the railing with the guns in both hands, and a white flash raced through his field of vision above. The arrow of light was sucked into the helicopter and disappeared. The helicopter made a popping sound and tilted in the air.

"Jr.!" Following the voice, Momo was standing at the park entrance with a bow in one hand.

Jr. put one foot on the guardrail and leaped up to six meters above where the helicopter was hovering. Ziggy and Chaos attacked the soldiers head-on as they looked up in surprise. Jr. continued to shoot at the helicopter as he fell. The helicopter caught fire, rotated slowly in the air, and crashed into the wall of the building.

"Chaos, old man! Dodge!"

The three of them jumped and lay down on the road. A hot blast burned their backs. Looking back nervously, they saw that the helicopter had become a mass of iron, spewing intense flames in the middle of the slope. Ziggy stood up.

"If we stay like this, we'll be cornered. Let's hurry ahead."

A bullet grazed his head, and Jr. ducked.

"You're right. How many of them are there, anyway?"

Hiding from tree to tree, they passed through a large park with dense grass and climbed a long flight of stairs to reach the block above.

"Ah!" At the landing, Chaos pointed below. The soldiers in white armor were crossing the park and running toward them. Jr. clicked his tongue and looked up at the sky.

"Are they watching us from somewhere? This won't work. Momo, can you observe the coordinates of the target location?"

Momo nodded slightly hesitantly.

"Go ahead. I'll draw them away here. Old man, Chaos. Take care of Momo!"

However, Momo hesitated and didn’t move.

"I'll definitely catch up later, don't worry."

He stroked Momo's hair and pushed her out of the way. He watched the three of them run away. He leaned his back against the wall, and concentrated. He wove his thought waves to form a line with Gaignun.

<—Gaignun! Heading to 2089. Ask Helmer for support>

However, there was no reply. He couldn't feel Gaignun's presence anywhere. Gaignun and Jr. were listed as the two representative directors of the Kukai Foundation, but the roles they played were very different. Thanks to Gaignun handling the strenuous duties of diplomatic negotiations and steering the organization, Jr. could act freely as a field operative. Telepathic conversation between Gaignun and Jr. was usually treated as the highest priority—a bond and a habit of theirs that they used as weapons.

He wondered if Gaignun was sleeping on the job. He clicked his tongue, cautiously stuck his face out, and surveyed the enemy's situation. Another four or five people seemed to have gathered. A bullet grazed past his ear as he hastily pulled back. He

told himself to calm down. He pressed his chest and regulated his breathing. He saw the image of an attack welling up and breaking through its shell, about to burst forth.

"Gaignun!" Jr. desperately called out to his distant ally.

In a distant office, a disturbing sensation crept into Gaignun Kukai's mind—a frustrating feeling like getting too close to text and being unable to read characters. There was an ominous and intelligent hand that fumbled through his consciousness. A completely different, yet all too familiar, other self whispered to him of memories of golden-haired children in metal pods.

Gaignun Kukai gasped, opened his eyes, and woke up. His focus was unsteady, and the world was blurry. He had goosebumps all over his body and a severe headache. He felt as if he had heard a voice, but he couldn't remember it. There was a silver coffee pot in front of his eyes.

"Hey, Gaignun!" The voice echoed in his skull.

Gaignun came to his senses and sat up. He ran a finger across his temple, hiding his agitation, and focused his consciousness. Jr.’s fighting will flowed in through the waves. He immediately recognized that Jr. was in combat.

"Sorry, what's the situation?" Gaignun finally managed to form words in his head.

"2089," Jr.’s telepathy conveyed the bare minimum of information, as if frustrated.

"Understood," Gaignun replied, desperately spinning his stagnant thoughts. He concentrated harder to focus on the voice, but Jr.’s voice was no longer audible. He knew Jr. trusted him to move accurately with just that exchange.

Gaignun stood up and reached for the communication device. He prided himself on his calm judgment, but it was slightly clouded now. More than half of his consciousness was wrapped in something inexplicable, and his arms moved only sluggishly. He knew he had to live up to Jr.’s trust. He urgently needed to contact Helmer in Second Miltia.

Something cold stroked his spine. On the surface of the silver pot, deep fingerprints that he didn't remember touching floated clearly. Coffee had spilled, forming a puddle in the saucer. A shudder climbed his spine. He wondered what he had been doing.

The AMWS Scutum roared, flying past buildings. Hermann looked down at the state of the Second Miltian city from the cockpit display. People were running away in confusion or cowering. A flashy flame flashed across the screen as his partner Richard’s machine, the AMWS Pyramus, descended from above him.

Hermann glared at the light purple machine with irritation. He had been able to track the girl until she fled into the park, but now she was gone from the satellite feed. As expected, a signal came in, and Hermann's face stiffened with tension as he connected the communication. The face of a platinum-blonde woman, Pellegri, appeared on the monitor.

"Richard, Hermann. You shot rocket launchers into the highway and destroyed the tunnel. For such a flashy success, the reward seems small."

"I apologize. However, with all due respect, that was Richard who—"

"I don't have time for excuses. You failed, and now you plan to waste more of my time? The ground forces are sending footage of them. Just confirm that for now."

Hermann tapped the panel and called up the synchronized image of a gunfight.

"Is that a child we're fighting? They don't look like the target."

"Unfortunately, it's not a Type 100 Prototype. And it's not a child either. U.R.T.V. Rubedo. One of the representative directors of the foundation. That's according to Albedo's information."

Hermann gasped. He realized this child was a U.R.T.V. He remembered the shockwaves from the limousine earlier and realized that if the pursuit had continued, his machine might have failed.

"Does 'no target' mean they are acting separately?"

"You ask the obvious, Hermann. This is a diversionary operation because they've been cornered. I've almost pinpointed the place they are aiming for. Point 2089."

Hermann tapped the console with trembling fingers. Coordinates Point 2089 was the Second Miltia Sixth Defense Mechanism, an automated base embedded in the city.

"Don't even think about defeating it," Pellegri warned. "Information suggests that not only a U.R.T.V. but also that cyborg who single-handedly infiltrated Pleroma is guarding the target."

Hermann's brows furrowed in displeasure at the mention of the cyborg. He felt he had to make that person pay for making a fool of Pleroma.

"I'll go," Pellegri said. "It will probably take about fifteen minutes to descend from geosynchronous orbit. Stall for time until then."

"Understood," Hermann replied. He operated the console and felt himself integrate with the machine. "Richard!"

"Ah, well, I'll just check, but of course, you're not planning to just quietly buy time, are you?" Richard’s high-pitched laugh came through the comms. Hermann didn't answer and cut the communication.

Jr. was breathing heavily while running up the stairs. He used a barrage of fire to disrupt the pursuers and escaped into a narrow alleyway. A telepathic voice rang in his head.

<"Jr., I found their eyes. It seems a reconnaissance satellite was hijacked. Meli is working on recovering it. I can take it out in about thirty seconds.">

Gaignun reported the matter indifferently. He sounded weak, but Jr. decided not to think about it. "Thank you, Gaignun."

"What will you do from now on? 2089 might not be safe."

"If so, that's fine by me. If we fight there, the city won't be damaged, right?"

"I see."

"The rest is up to me."

Jr. closed the telepathic link. He jumped and stood on top of a fence. He could see the giant cylindrical base of the Sixth Defense Mechanism. A roar echoed overhead as two streaks of flame flew across the sky. The A.M.W.S. units were heading straight for the base.

"I can't afford to waste time. Momo will be attacked."

Jr. hastily jumped over the wall and ran toward the facility. The entrance was already open, likely because Helmer had activated the friend-or-foe selection function. Jr. infiltrated the interior and ran up the stairs toward the top floor.

Jumping out of the exit onto the circular rooftop, he saw two A.M.W.S. units standing with their backs to him. Momo and the others were cornered at the edge. Ziggy and Chaos stood between the machines and Momo, poised for battle. Jr. walked casually toward them with a pistol in each hand.

The U.R.T.V. concentrated a unique wave into his brain. He extended both arms and held his pistols upward. He had no hesitation in shooting them in the back. He sharpened all the nerves in his body with his favorite "piercing" visualization.

"Uoooooohh!"

He unleashed all his bullets on the slender A.M.W.S. The machine stumbled and fell onto its knees. It twisted to check its attacker. Jr. smiled and pointed a pistol at the spherical head. The impact of the shot traveled up his arm. The A.M.W.S. recoiled, and Chaos immediately leaped in with a glowing arm. The machine fell face down.

Jr.’s eyes followed the other A.M.W.S. escaping into the air. His gunfire hit the opponent's leg, and the unbalanced enemy crashed down.

"Disappear," Jr. said.

An explosion occurred in the legs, and the machine wobbled. The Scutum spun in the air and was slammed onto the roof. The shockwave made Hermann's consciousness blur.

"That monster—" Hermann thought. "I'm going to be killed."

Another impact struck the cockpit, and a mass of energy raged inside. Hermann hit the back of his head on the seat, feeling his body come apart. He felt a fear he had never felt on any battlefield—a fear of a child.

"What are you doing! You good-for-nothing!" Richard’s voice yelled. "That's enough. I'll take care of it myself."

He saw the Pyramus brandish its sword and leap at the U.R.T.V. Missiles were fired, and light enveloped everything. A blue shadow leaped behind the Pyramus.

"Richard, behind you," Hermann tried to say, but his voice wouldn't come out.

The cyborg's arm spewed flames. Hit from behind, the Pyramus recoiled and crashed onto the rooftop. Richard's hysterical screams were heard over the communication.

To Hermann, the inside of the cockpit seemed to become narrower. An alarm blared, and the interior turned red. He stared in astonishment at the HUD.

"What is this high-energy reaction? Is a destroyer nearby?"

No, that wasn't it. A black silhouette was floating in the sky above—a unit called the E.S. Issachar[9]. It was a unit equipped with an "Anima Vessel," a relic of vast power. The E.S. Issachar slowly descended, its black frame covered in a pink light. An eerie roar pierced the heavens.

Jr. gasped, glaring at the black unit. "Seriously? What is that thing?"

He slowly backed away, shielding Momo. His instincts told him this was an opponent they could never beat. The base fired a missile, but the machine easily shot it down with its polearm. The E.S. Issachar looked down at Jr. and the others.

"Any more resistance is meaningless. Hand over the Type 100 quietly," a cold female voice echoed.

Jr. bit his lip, trying to think of how to protect Momo.

"Jr., something's coming. Overhead, altitude 700 meters—" Momo said.

Jr. looked up and saw a silhouette in the sky— The E.S.Asher. The E.S. Issachar flinched as gunfire assaulted it. The black machine escaped the barrage, and a blue-purple machine swooped down from the sky. The two collided.

"That machine—is it piloted by Canaan!?!?!"

The E.S. units soared into the sky, clashing and glaring at each other. The E.S. Asher discarded its destroyed armament and transferred new weapons to its hand. The E.S. Issachar reassembled its shoulder mechanism into a palm and grasped The E.S. Asher.

"Oh no, I'm caught. Canaan will be defeated!" Jr. shouted.

The two machines violently collided again in the air. At that moment, a shockwave swept across the sky, and the air seemed to freeze. Time seemed to stop for the two machines. Then, a mass of high frequencies spread out.

"Kyaa!" Momo screamed and covered her ears.

"This is—are the two machines resonating?" Ziggy asked.

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[9] E.S. Issachar means Issachar, son of Jacob in the Book of Genesis. The E.S series seems to each refer to a tribe of israel.

The resonance phenomenon ended in an instant, and the two E.S. units visibly lost their power. They remained intertwined in the air, drained of energy.

"Kuh, we'll have to retreat for now…" Pellegri's voice came from the E.S. Issachar.

The enemy unit kicked the E.S. Asher away and escaped. The A.M.W.S. units followed. The E.S. Asher remained drifting in the sky.

"What on earth happened?" Jr. asked.

"I don't know," Chaos said. "But seeing them retreat in a hurry, it was unexpected for them as well."

Jr. put his pistols back and looked up at The E.S. Asher. The machine recovered and descended toward them.

"Yo, are you okay? What happened?" Jr. shouted.

"I'm fine," Canaan's voice replied. "Even so, it's incomprehensible. This is the first time it's shown such behavior since I boarded it."

"Seriously—if you were going to help, come sooner. You made me nervous!"

"Are you acquainted?" Momo asked.

"Yeah, an old friend," Jr. casually exchanged glances with Chaos.

"It's not like you to complain like that, Rubedo," Canaan's voice said.

"It's Gaignun now. Learn to remember that already!" Jr. gave a wry smile.

"The old impression is still strong—there likely won't be any enemy pursuit for a while. I'm returning to City Hall first. See you later."

The E.S. Asher flew away. Momo regained a little of her smile. Jr. lightly nudged her head to hide his embarrassment.

"That guy, we finally met again after such a long time, but he's still a guy with no charm."

"Um..." Momo asked hesitantly. "Can Momo… uhm, also call you Rubedo? It's such a beautiful name."

Jr.’s smile froze for a moment. He shook his head. "Sorry, that's uh… No, I don't have very good memories associated with that name."

Momo looked sad. "...Jr.-san and Ziggy don't really like their real names, do they?"

Jr. shook his head again, erasing the phantom image of the girl that had appeared.

"Well, it's fine, isn't it? The old man seems to like the name Ziggy anyway. It sounds a bit like a loyal dog."

Jr. sat down on the rubble, his coat flapping in the wind.

"But look, the sky is wide. Honestly, the only ones who welcome me politely are my enemies. That's enough. Let's hurry up and go deliver Momo."

<Don't sulk, Commander> a telepathic message came from Gaignun. <We have received a formal welcome message from Representative Helmer. We should be landing there soon too. Let's meet at the city hall.>

【Chapter 3】The Key to Reaching Y

There was a slight unease in the clear blue sky. Shion Uzuki stopped in front of the Vector Industries branch office building, turned around, and looked back. Far away, smoke was rising towards the sky from between the buildings.

"What is that, I wonder..." Allen said with a yawn. He was still jet-lagged.

"I don't know, but it's probably not good." Shion said, suppressing a vague anxiety.

They passed through the entrance and announced their arrival at the unmanned reception counter. There were no other visitors in the quiet space. KOS-MOS silently watched the scene. It was humid, and Shion plucked at her uniform to fan herself.

She realized she wouldn't be able to see KOS-MOS for a while. Shion tried to say something but couldn't think of anything. Having to hand over KOS-MOS in such an incomplete state still weighed heavily on her as a developer.

Just before the incident at the Woglinde, numerous ports had been added to the mainframe at the request of the government and the company. The more complex the input and output became, the more unpredictable KOS-MOS's behavior became.

Until then, KOS-MOS had activated automatically and acted autonomously. It had returned to Second Miltia on its own from beyond the universe, as if it possessed its own will. Shion had merely assisted in that process.
She used to consciously try to forget him, but recently she often thought of Kevin Winnicot.

He was a presence so close, yet so distant. Sometimes, she would find herself gazing at KOS-MOS with a gentle sense of floating, as if Kevin Senpai had entered her—mistaking the figure before her not for a combat android, but for a being with a living soul.

"Ah, they've arrived. Those people."

Allen cleared his throat, adjusted his hair, and stifled another yawn that welled up. Three people wearing Vector's yellow uniforms walked from the elevator hall. The leader was a middle-aged male, among the oldest class in Vector where young people were numerous; Shion remembered exchanging communications with him several times via the Elsa.
He was the chief engineer of Development Bureau 2, the person who would be handed KOS-MOS this time. The engineer put on a businesslike smile and extended his hand. While shaking hands, he looked at KOS-MOS as if evaluating her. Shion hadn't noticed during video calls, but up close, he looked withered and lacking vitality for his age.

Shion felt a delusion as if she were entrusting her beloved daughter to a teacher, and she wanted to click her tongue at her own mental regression. Work was work; it had to be separated from sentimentality.
"Hello, thank you for your hard work. Chief Utsugi."
Shion put on a facade of an expression as much as possible and greeted the engineer back.

"I apologize for the concern. I'm sorry. We were scheduled to arrive much earlier."
"No, well, I don't know the details, but it seems like it was a great voyage. I guess we're relieved that we could receive KOS-MOS safely like this."
While heading towards the elevator hall, the engineer glanced at KOS-MOS again.
"We had them check the simple data that was sent over. The whole team was astonished. The performance of KOS-MOS is wonderfully beyond imagination."

Using the elevator to move between floors, Shion and the others were guided further into the research wing. The development research lab was spacious, orderly, and clean. On the monitors in front of the terminals arranged in a U-shape were various blueprints immediately recognizable as KOS-MOS's.
Shion, who had been involved with the KOS-MOS emotional development department from the start, often tended to forget that KOS-MOS was developed as an anti-Gnosis weapon.

The optional armaments by the two bureaus seemed dozens of times more advanced than Shion's vague knowledge. As she looked around the lab with bitter astonishment, the engineer puffed out his chest slightly with pride.
"Thanks to you, it seems we can show a certain level of results regarding Project Zohar."
"Project Zohar?"

It was a name she had never heard. Shion and Allen looked at each other, tilting their heads.

Many aspects of the overall KOS-MOS development plan were unknown even to the people in Bureau 1 who handled system development.
"The Gnosis phenomenon is expanding at an accelerating rate. The latest research even predicts that in the worst case, all humanity will be wiped out in a few years. Over 120 solar systems have already disappeared. It's not public knowledge, but the reality is truly pressing."

The technician pointed with his right hand at the various KOS-MOS armaments displayed on the monitor.
"Armament options are also becoming quite developed. With the option equipment of the KOS-MOS we are developing, KOS-MOS can interfere with the Zohar Control System to a certain extent by itself. We call this the third type of armament."

Shion tilted her head, still not fully understanding the relationship between KOS-MOS and the Zohar.
"Imagining from the name 'Project Zohar', is it a project based on the relationship between Gnosis and the Zohar? Probably sponsored by the Contact Subcommittee, right?"
The technician nodded.
"We have a close cooperation system with the committee for the project.

The relationship between the Zohar and the Gnosis has been pointed out for a long time. In other words, a structure with the same properties as the Zohar, including an emulator, attracts large swarms of Gnosis."
Shion shook her head.
"However, not all of the 120 solar systems that were attacked and destroyed by Gnosis had Zohar emulators. Only twelve emulators have been confirmed, and including the emulator recovered by the Woglinde, they are all currently stored at the Kukai Foundation. I don't think the relationship between Gnosis and the Zohar is necessarily an absolute condition."

"Of course, not all Gnosis are mechanically drawn to the power of the Zohar. The evidence is not there. In reality, they are considered to be moving in a more complex manner. However, at the root of the Gnosis phenomenon is the Zohar. This is a statistical fact. You understand. Gnosis appears with a non-negligible frequency where the Zohar is located."

The technician thought for a moment, then pointed with one hand to a rugged shutter in the corner of the room.
"Very well. I will let you actually see the Third Type Armament. Please come this way."
The technician hit the security panel. The shutter slid sideways, revealing the inside. It was Development Bureau 2's experimental facility with various instruments lined up. Several engineers were working and looked at Shion and KOS-MOS who had entered with curiosity.

It caught her eye immediately after entering the room. KOS-MOS's wireframe was displayed on a giant screen that occupied more than half of one wall of the room, and an image of a wing-shaped armament unit was connected to both of her shoulders.

Receiving Shion's surprise honestly, the technician spoke with a little pleasure.
"Project Zohar is a major plan being promoted with the goal of eradicating Gnosis from this universe. For that purpose, we must salvage the Original Zohar that still sleeps in Old Miltia. Because the Original Zohar has been researched as the highest energy engine in this dimensional universe for half a century. However, the core of that Zohar—the core unit for controlling the Zohar—is a double-edged sword."
Seeing Shion's suspicious look, the engineer made a sign to the operator.

"Well, please take a look."
A reddish-purple veil was projected onto the huge screen. Against the backdrop of the jet-black universe, layers of clouds with subtle colors intermingled were folded over and over. As she stared at them, she felt like she was being sucked in.
"Are you aware of this? This is footage captured by an escape ship from Old Miltia fourteen years ago. It's a phenomenon called U-DO. Apart from the initial event of a core unit going out of control, the details are completely unknown.

This influence caused the Miltia space region to become like it is now. As you know, we can't even get close due to the double black holes. And most importantly, we must not forget that Gnosis occurred in response to this U-DO."
"So, the fact that this KOS-MOS optional armament is being developed means—c-could it be that new Gnosis will appear again?" Allen cried out in a scream-like voice.
"I can't say for sure. However, I think it's entirely possible," said the engineer.

At the engineer's signal, the U-DO footage disappeared, and the display returned to showing KOS-MOS's wings as before. Shion pointed to the third type of armament and asked, "This is the unit phase transition system on both shoulders, right?"
"As expected of the flower of the first section, it's just as expected of Chief Uzuki."
"Please don't patronize me." She was slightly annoyed by the technician's tone.

The phase transition system was not a topic to be discussed in jest. Literally, phase transition was a mechanism that forcibly gave fluctuations to the phase of matter in a vacuum. Since it distorted space itself, depending on how it was used, it could affect the entire universe.
The technician gave a wry smile and immediately regained a serious face.

"Excuse me. This was developed for the Archetype, but we have readjusted it for the current KOS-MOS. The system radius is 130 nanometers."
"One hundred thirty!! Can you control it? Something on that scale?" Allen shouted.
"Regarding the control of the phase transition system, the Second Section and the War Tactics Research will stake their prestige on absolutely making it a success. That's why we transferred KOS-MOS here."

The technician spoke with a face full of confidence that didn't show the slightest anxiety. His attitude, on the contrary, called forth Shion's anxiety. The moment she saw the wing-shaped armament on the screen, she already had a bad feeling. Dangerous armaments were being enhanced one after another, ignoring the deciphering of the black box.

"What if I said we can't hand it over?" Shion spoke in as calm a voice as possible. The technician just tilted his head suspiciously.
"This is a project based on a formal government request. As a software development manager, you have no right to refuse."
"I guess not," Shion sighed faintly in resignation. She knew it was a futile resistance. As long as KOS-MOS wasn't showing any obvious behavioral issues, there was no choice but to back down.

The engineer spoke persuasively."I understand your anxiety given the circumstances of KOS-MOS's activation. But, well, it's fine, really. Based on KOS-MOS's activity logs so far, headquarters believes it can be done, and we team members feel the same way. We've made preparations."
"So we have no choice but to trust it," she said.
"It should be possible. Above all, this system was designed by Kevin Winnicot, who was at the First Bureau." Shion was surprised to hear that name mentioned and gasped. What he had said, what he had been thinking, and what she had assumed were momentarily confused.

The engineer didn't notice the agitation on Shion's face and looked again at the third-type armament. His profile was filled with hope and pride. Shion shook her head

slightly and spoke in a businesslike tone."—Understood. At 14:00 hours today, KOS-MOS will be transferred to the Second Development Bureau.
The documents will be sent to you later, so please fill in the necessary information and return them to me at the office. The software transfer will be handled by Allen Ridgely. If you have any questions, please ask him."
The technician looked at Allen's face and nodded slightly. After thanking them for showing her the development results, Shion left the room alone.

She glanced at KOS-MOS for a moment, then walked past her. KOS-MOS remained completely expressionless even at this farewell. Shion walked alone down the corridor, holding her aching chest. She recalled the armaments she had seen on the screen. Perhaps this wasn't the last time; various other weapons would likely be placed on her from then on.

—Kevin Senpai. He had said that KOS-MOS was born to save people.
—I believe it. No, I want to believe it. That she is not merely a weapon for destruction, and that the future she creates will be an ideal world without the destruction and slaughter that has swept away all values.

Was that a naive ideal? Kevin Senpai had been murdered by the original KOS-MOS model. Even so, she wanted to believe. By believing what Kevin Winnicot believed, even just a little... she wished she could get closer to the place he was in, the place he aimed for. She wanted to believe in the future he felt while building her. She thought of his light blue eyes, without a single cloud, when he was looking at KOS-MOS. What did he see beyond her?

Following Shion, Allen burst out of the room.
"Wait a minute. What's wrong? You seemed a little strange today, Chief."
"Nothing, same as always," Shion said, suppressing her emotions as casually as possible.
"Are you going somewhere?" Allen looked at Shion with a bewildered look.
"Just to town, you know. It's been a while."
"It's been a while, oh, I see. The Chief's family home is..."
"Yeah, here in the Eighth District."
Shion, who had started walking with a wave of her hand, suddenly stopped.
"Hey, Allen-kun. Never take your eyes off KOS-MOS, okay?"
"Huh?"

Leaving a surprised Allen behind, Shion proceeded down the hallway toward the elevator hall. She was away from her now. Maybe after the adjustment work on the Type 3 armament was finished, she could go back to working on KOS-MOS again.

Anyway, for now she had no choice but to trust KOS-MOS. KOS-MOS had saved her life countless times, so it shouldn't be that difficult. However, she remembered the chaotic battle with the Gnosis at the Woglinde, and KOS-MOS's back as she mercilessly shot Lieutenant Virgil just to increase their chances of survival by a mere few dozen percent.
"But this is the only way now, isn't it?"
She called out to the girl's image that had haunted her heart since the Woglinde, but now the girl was nowhere to be found.

Shion rode a long escalator and looked down at the cityscape. The area had completely changed. Visibly, more high-rise buildings had increased, and it looked very glamorous due to the colorful advertising videos projected on the walls and in the air. It was a weekday afternoon, but there were many people, and the hustle and bustle was full of life. General vehicles were prohibited from entering this sector, so there were only pedestrians on the streets.

For over thirty minutes, Shion aimlessly wandered the streets without finding any particular use. After leaving the branch office, she remembered her superiors and tried to contact them via Connection Gear, but there was no response.

Perhaps because she had been working constantly, after handing over KOS-MOS, she didn't know how to use her time. She didn't feel like shopping, and the thought of her brother being there made her not want to go home.
If she were to write a report addressed to the head office, she would feel a lack of energy, as it would seem that the years she spent with KOS-MOS would truly come to a close.

For now, the question was where to stay tonight. Her own home was out of the question. She was also reluctant to stay at the company office on the very first day. If she went to the seaside area where the spaceport was, there were many good hotels for tourists. She had inwardly hoped to stay at a facility related to the Foundation, but since she couldn't get in touch, it couldn't be helped.

Going to see Momo-chan might have been nice, but the girl was probably busy with preparations for analysis work right now; a woman who had had her job taken away and was drifting aimlessly through the city would only be in the way. While thinking

such things and window shopping at advertisements, she gradually started to feel hungry. She hadn't eaten anything since morning.

A few minutes after starting to look for a restaurant sign, Shion tilted her head at one that caught her eye. A character with a white whale in the center of the signboard had his teeth bared, and around it was a circle that said <MOBY DICK CAFE>.
"Moby Dick - could this be it?"

When she touched the panel on the door, it slid open, and a bell rang above her head. Then a different world spread out before her eyes. The interior was laid out to resemble a wooden sailing ship. The floor, made of planks, was like the deck of an old ship, and the pillars were decorated with cast nets and ropes like masts. There was a small pool on the right, and the sound of waves mixed with a quiet piano tune from the speakers.

Going up a small flight of stairs, she saw a small counter in the back left, and a large model of a whale was hanging above it. Inside the counter, the man who seemed to be the owner was polishing a glass by himself. He had a kind face with a magnificent mustache.

"It's true. boss!" Shion walked up to the counter.
"Oh, hehe, hey," he said, raising one hand to the side of his face in greeting.
The boss stared blankly at Shion's face for a while, but then his face suddenly cleared, and he narrowed his eyes nostalgically.
"If it isn't Shion-chan. You've become quite womanly since I last saw you. Since high school?"
"——Yes. It's been a while. Did you move here?"
"We couldn't beat the wave of redevelopment. Well, I thought at least the inside of the store could remain the same, so the interior is as it is."
Shion looked around and nodded in satisfaction.
"Yeah, Moby Dick has to be like this."
The boss indicated the counter and placed a glass down.

"Here, have a seat. The usual?" Shion sat on a round chair at the counter and remembered she was hungry. "——Actually, I'm starving. Could I have that too?"
The boss smiled slyly behind his mustache and nodded.
"Sure thing. Understood——By the way, what brings you here today? On vacation?"
The sound of waves from the wall speakers covered the creaking chair. Shion shook her head. She linked her hands, stretched her body fully, and looked up at the whale above her head.

"Work. I had business here. The second bureau of the branch office building. I'm pretty much done though."
Thinking that she couldn't think of anything to do without work was a pathetic worry she could never let anyone hear.
"Hmm, so, it was Vector, wasn't it? I heard about you from Jin."
Shion involuntarily flinched upon hearing the name. The shop, which had felt comfortable, suddenly began to take on an ominous color.

She asked hesitantly, "Does my brother come here?"
"Yeah, every now and then. What? Haven't you met him yet? Now that you're back, shouldn't you go see him?"
The boss shrugged his shoulders with a look of exasperation. Just then, the bell at the entrance rang. The boss looked up.
"Oh, speak of the devil—"

Shion nearly fell off her seat. A voice came from the entrance.
"Whoa, look at this, Chaos. The interior is perfect. It's got that Bequad vibe, doesn't it?" The owner of the voice climbed the stairs with a creak.
"In a place like this, the boss probably has a mustache like this, and makes the customers call him 'Captain'." Red hair popped out from the stairs.
"See? Just as I said—" The top one pointed at the boss. "Ah—there she is."

"Shion?" followed Chaos, his eyes wide.
A surprised boss from inside the counter looked down at Shion. She was about to fall off the counter seat, somehow clinging to it.
"What are you doing, Shion-chan?"

Shion hurriedly pushed away from the counter, stood up, waved her hands around, and greeted the two flusteredly.
"Ah, no, what's up, both of you together?"
Jr. and Chaos looked at each other's faces.
"Well, we're hungry," "So we just happened to come in here."
"What? You know each other?" asked the boss.
"Yeah, well..."

Shion sat down while looking around restlessly.
" 'Well' is a bit harsh, isn't it?" Chaos said in a slightly teasing tone.
"Ah, sorry. Just a bit. I was flustered."

Saying that, Shion, who still couldn't hide her agitation, spoke.
"Flustered about what?" Chaos tilted his head.
"Well, family matters, I guess," the boss said with a wry smile.
Shion let out a dry laugh. Jr. and Chaos's expressions were full of confusion.
"Shion, you tried contacting us several times with Connection Gear, right? We thought maybe if we came around here we might meet you. But this is a crazy coincidence, isn't it?"

Whether she was listening to the words or not, Shion nodded repeatedly with an artificial smile pasted on her face. Jr. shrugged his shoulders with a slightly dumbfounded expression. "Well, whatever. Captain, I'm hungry, do you have any recommended dishes??" The boss nodded amicably and pointed to the back of the shop."I'll bring it right away. Hey, Shion, sitting side-by-side isn't great, why don't you use that table over there? We don't have any other customers right now, you can talk at ease."

Accepting the boss's suggestion, the three moved to the back table. Jr. had changed into a subdued maroon coat instead of the black one that was completely tattered from the highway attack. The three exchanged their stories so far.
Shion was astonished to hear from Jr. and the others about the attack by AMWS on the highway. Jr. laughed, saying that afterwards he almost got caught by the city police.

"It would be boring just being questioned when I finally came down here after so long. I left Old Man Ziggy and ran away."
Shion was partly dumbfounded and partly impressed by Jr.'s extraordinary toughness. Jr., meanwhile, was in a good mood, eating the exquisite, steaming curry recommended by Moby Dick, saying, "It's delicious!".

Watching him continue to eat with an eagerness that looked like he was going to plunge his face into the dish, Shion had a feeling that she had been naive in her foresight. She had various worries about KOS-MOS, but she had assumed that things would naturally proceed calmly once she reached the district.

They arrived at Second Miltia. However, U-TIC organization combat weapons appeared even in the middle of the city. There was also the anti-U-DO phase transition system installed in KOS-MOS. The space history surrounding Old Miltia and Second Miltia seemed to be gradually swallowed by the giant shadow extending from the Zohar.

According to the explanation, Momo's analysis work was set to start the following day due to preparation. Shion still felt a desire to accompany the analysis work. Her interest in the Y data hidden in Momo's depths was also growing.

It might have been possible to attend the Y data analysis using the Foundation's connections, but she had given up on that for the time being. During the grace period until the recall request from Vector headquarters, she wanted to stay by KOS-MOS's side for as long as possible.

After finishing his meal, Jr. heard that the restaurant was Shion's favorite spot in high school and had a lively conversation about it with the Boss at the counter. "I wasn't a very social student," Shion recalled those days. She barely remembered the names of her friends from that time.

She had been absorbed in accumulating basic knowledge to become a Realian researcher using the U.M.N. database back then. Or rather, she had been pretending to be absorbed. Thanks to that, she had become a person capable of somewhat constructive thinking. Adapting to her environment and becoming an adult, she had undergone that strange change, which could even be called regression. Before she knew it, she could smile brightly in everyday life. However, she wondered if it was all just a vain smoke screen gathered to cover up the past.

Meeting Nephilim and Feburonia peeled away the emotional surface that was struggling to forget the past. She felt she still couldn't face the pain of the past that was about to be exposed.

That encounter with those phantom girls had, before she knew it, become an important compass for Shion to determine the vector of her actions. Nephilim and Feburonia—those mysterious imaginary existences—became the phantoms of the many dead she had stepped over thus far, guiding her.

Especially since the death of Kevin Winnicott, Shion had realized that she carried on driven more by the dead than the living. Innumerable dead—for example, Kevin Senpai and Lieutenant Virgil, who were killed by KOS-MOS's hand, and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew and others who died after Gnosisification—felt like they were clinging to her heart and surrounding Shion's world. It wasn't unpleasant; rather, she often felt irritated by living people. Since the Miltian conflict, she might have been living in a half-dead world.

The sound of the doorbell rang. "Oh, welcome," the Boss's friendly voice called out. Shion suddenly came back to her senses. One man came up the stairs, making them creak. He was a handsome man in exotic attire, with long black hair tied back and a black-dyed kimono worn dashingly. Shion rushed to her feet and scurried around, but there was no place to run or hide on the ship to hunt the white whale.

"Boss, my usual, please---extra spicy." After saying that, the man who just entered—Jin Uzuki—stopped his eyes at Shion's table.

At the Uzuki family residence, in the back parlor with tatami mats, the small sound of a deer scarer could be heard from the garden. The afternoon light shone through the open shoji screen.

Shion, Jr., Chaos, and Jin sat around a rectangular low table, and Shion's progress report continued. When her brother's name had come up from the mouth of the boss of Moby Dick, she had thought this might happen. She had possessed a premonition. Of course, bad premonitions were the ones that always came true.

The group that happened to meet at Moby Dick ended up discussing the events so far at the Uzuki house in the Sector 8 suburbs of Second Miltia. Shion skipped over the dangerous parts as much as possible to avoid trouble. However, even as he listened to Shion's story, Jin's expression became increasingly gloomy. When Shion finished speaking and closed her mouth, Jin remained silent for a while and glanced at Jr. and Chaos. The deer scarer rang again.

Perhaps her older brother sensed Shion's true feelings from the way she spoke; his usually cool eyes had a slight edge to them. "So, you want to help them?" Jin asked. Shion nodded. As she spoke, her resolve hardened.

"My work has settled down for a bit, so I was thinking I could cooperate with the Foundation and help with the Miltian investigation. There must be help I can only provide by being at Vector, right?"

Behind this decision was, of course, empathy for the Foundation and the others, but there was also a more concrete calculation. Once the KOS-MOS handover period ended, she would probably be assigned to the "Dawn" project for a while by head office order.

She would be separated from KOS-MOS in an isolated laboratory, gradually and inevitably. The difference in information quality was immense. If she cooperated with the Kukai Foundation and the autonomous state government, she wanted to put herself in a position where she could at least partially monitor the all-galactic movements surrounding KOS-MOS, Gnosis, and U-DO, even from a distance.

Jin twisted his face into a grimace and shook his head. "I can't say I'm impressed with that. By the sound of it, they seem to be pros in that field, don't they? It's not something amateurs should meddle in."

"Amateurs..." Shion was stuck for words and looked at the faces of Jr. and Chaos. "I was quite useful too, you know?? Right??" Caught between the siblings' gazes, the two merely fidgeted uncomfortably on their cushions and didn't answer.

At this point, Shion grew irritated at her brother's sensible attitude. She thought she was far more level-headed than her brother.

Just a moment ago, at the entrance of their family home which she had returned to after a long time, they had a full-blown argument about a business Jin had supposedly started. Only a few months ago, she had heard from her brother's own mouth that he would become a doctor. Instead, he had renovated the house and started a used bookstore for collectors, selling old books scraped together from his grandfather's belongings and other sources.

Jin had never been able to continue the same job for more than half a year. She wondered why she had to listen to a lecture from such a person. She had made up her mind after thinking things through her own way, so she didn't want her decision to be casually overturned based on half-baked ideas or impressions.

In short, her brother was acting. His composure was just a facade; he was awkwardly and desperately trying to play the role of a parent. Shion sulked and stared at the low table. She didn't like it. She wondered why she had to go along with this act.

The sunlight illuminating the wooden surface was gradually changing to the color of evening. Jin pinched the space between his eyebrows with his fingers and let out a sigh. "Well, anyway, get some good rest today. Tomorrow we can go visit Mom and Dad's graves—"

"Wait a minute!" Shion interrupted him. Blood rushed to her head. She stood up slightly and yelled. "Don't bring that up again in all the confusion. That topic again? I've said many times before that I'm not going, haven't I? No way. I absolutely don't want to go!"

Intimidated by the harshness of Shion's tone, Jin lowered his voice. "You say that, but as a child's duty, we should at least offer a flower at our parents' graves—"

Shion shook her head violently and stood up. The lid of her memory was about to open as she struggled. She could not bear it even then; a terror and sadness that she could not possibly accept suddenly welled up, and Shion's eyes filled with tears.

"Stop it! And what do you mean by 'before the grave'? Dad and Mom aren't under that grave! You know where they are, don't you, big brother? That's right! At that time, only you and I were there." The resentment she had secretly accumulated spilled from Shion's mouth. "At that time, if you had come a little sooner, Dad, Mom..."

Shion closed her mouth. Jin's cheek trembled slightly, revealing his agitation. He bit his back teeth and looked down, as if enduring pain. Shion involuntarily covered her mouth with her hand. She said in a hoarse voice: "I, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I..."

Shion tore her gaze away from Jin's face. In her swimming vision, she made eye contact with Jr. and Chaos. They didn’t blame Shion, but simply looked back and forth between Shion and Jin in confusion. Shion fled from the side of the low dining table and ran to the veranda where the evening light played gently.

The setting sun dyed the gate of the Uzuki house an amber color. A black shadow huddled under the wall. A thicket of poorly maintained grass swayed in the breeze. Shion looked up at the crimson sky, enduring the pain and regret that stabbed her chest. "But, as I thought, I don't want to go to the grave," Shion said and left the place.

Her feet naturally headed towards her own room, at the very back of the house. She opened the door, went inside, and closed it behind her.

Her heart tightened at the sight of the bare room. Nothing was placed on the desk where she had studied so hard during her student days. There wasn't even a photo of her late parents; only a small rabbit doll sat alone on the edge of the desk.

It was the same lonely scene as when she had resolved never to live there again several years earlier and moved all her belongings out. Not a single speck of dust had fallen in the room.

Sitting on the bare mattress of the bed, Shion let out a deep sigh. As expected, she felt a dull pain in her lower abdomen. Shion listlessly threw herself onto the bed and covered her face with both arms. She could have removed the pain with nanomachines, but she still felt resistance to a completely painless civilization. She thought of her mother's last days spent in the severe illness ward of Old Miltia.

Mom and Dad. What kind of faces did you make when I was born? What did you envision? Surely, you never imagined that your children would end up living in a place so far away from this home planet. And that those two children would have a big fight over something as trivial as visiting a grave—

Sentimentality scratched at the outer shell of her heart. Even when she tried to remember her parents' faces, they wouldn't come to mind. Instead, she thought of the myriad parents of humanity who had set out into the vast universe.

It was a maddening, chest-tightening feeling. People who had sown seeds by throwing their emotions at each other—countless mothers, fathers, and children scattered their personas in the dark universe, fulfilling their great satisfaction and scattering across the planets.

Shion looked up at the dimly lit plank ceiling, repeating shallow breaths.

—*Shion.*

A faint voice was heard. Shion started and sat up, looking left and right, but there was no sign of Nephilim anywhere in the room, which had somehow become dim.

—*You should know. Memories don't really exist anywhere in your head. There is no storage house in the brain that pools the past. The brain draws maps with neurons for external perception. When present events reflect past events by chance, that is what people call a memory.*

In fact, all memories are what you call déjà vu. People are lonely beings in time. That is why it is fundamentally impossible to hide memories. All movements of external perception trace the grooves engraved in the brain and constantly replay memories. Therefore, you must understand the past of Miltia, not reject it.

Shion shook her head violently in the darkness. "—Impossible. Because no one can reach old Miltia anymore. It's blocked by a double black hole, and the U.M.N. and columns needed for a jump are cut off. In your own words… If you don't, it's a place cut off from the memory of the universe."

—*The world is being pushed forward again, with a defiled right hand and an innocent left hand. Don't despair, Shion. The path you are on is where people gain new recognition and understanding. If you cannot do that, you will wander in that mental pain forever.*

"I don't understand. If I can't understand the past, if I can't overcome it, what then? What should I do?" Shion's anxious voice was swallowed by the silence, and no answer came back.

Jin sat alone on the veranda, closed his eyes, and let the night breeze play around him. The night resonated deeply. The plants and grasses growing in clusters by the hedge were combed by the cool wind, and the sound of insects chirping could be heard from them. There was the sound of a candle burning and the flapping of moths flying around. The collection of these small sounds tickled the back of his ears and gradually melted his hardened heart. They invited the man to their concert every night.

Jin felt a presence behind him and opened his eyes. Strangely, he wasn't surprised by the sudden presence. Tonight, the person staying at the Uzuki house was a rare guest indeed—a young man who had suddenly appeared in the same form after fourteen years.

"You were here." It was a terribly quiet voice. Chaos, who appeared as if darkness had congealed, sat down quietly next to Jin, like a feather drifting down.

Jin half-closed his eyes and looked into the depths of the darkness, at the rustling grass in the night breeze. "It's a nice sound, isn't it?" He listened intently to the sound of insects coming from the garden.

Chaos didn’t answer. For a moment, Jin had the illusion that this calm young man had also vanished, blending in with the insect sounds. "This is the most calming place on sleepless nights."

"Is it Shion?" Chaos said.

Jin put on a bitter smile and closed his eyes. He felt as if his sister's furious voice could still be heard. "Yes, well. It's been two years since I saw her. I still thought of her as a child, but she's quite something—Haha, that personality must be inherited from her grandfather."

Jin opened his eyes and looked down at the lamp stand on a small plate on the porch. The red light vaguely illuminated Jin and Chaos's faces. A single moth fluttered around the flame. Jin glanced at Chaos's profile. "So, what do you want to ask? You're here because you have something to talk about, aren't you?"

Chaos hesitated a little, then closed his mouth. "Um, Jin, maybe you're still thinking about the U-TIC organization—"

Jin averted his eyes from the lamplight and looked up at the sky. The moon was hidden by clouds. "It's that matter after all, isn't it?" Jin let out a faint sigh and shook his head.

"Fourteen years. It seems long, but in fact it was just yesterday, that thing. It seems I'm fated to never escape this curse. No, did I bring it upon myself?"

The shadow of a moth danced in the lamplight, growing large, growing small, drawing patterns on the two men's bodies.

"Humanity, which started its history as hunter-gatherers, eventually found a way to control fire, and from that fire obtained the sword. The consciousness of seeking the future changes its form with time, and when they found the lamplight there, people forgot their original existence and rushed about. Come to think of it, we humans may be like winged insects invited by the candlelight, without knowing the end that awaits us."

"Do you know 'Shu-hyoron[10]' (Weekly Review)? At times it says, there is no darkness within the lamplight, nor is there darkness where the lamplight is. If illuminating is to break the darkness, what is that lamplight illuminating?"

Jin quickly pinched out the candle flame that was about to swallow the moth with his fingers. The moth, having lost its anchor, flapped two or three times discontentedly and eventually disappeared into the darkness. Swallowed by the darkness, the two men became only shadows.

"It seems she caused various troubles. Her taste is clumsy, but please continue to look after her."

"No, it is I who should say that."

"I couldn't be by her side during that most difficult time. And because I'm hung up on that, I still can't be close to her now. I must be scared. Surely. I'm afraid that if I get any closer than I am now, I won't be accepted as family, as a brother—that's what I'm afraid of."

Suddenly, the tension disappeared from Chaos's presence. "Shion brings up your name at every opportunity. I think that means she cares about you a lot."

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[10] I have no idea what this is referring to.

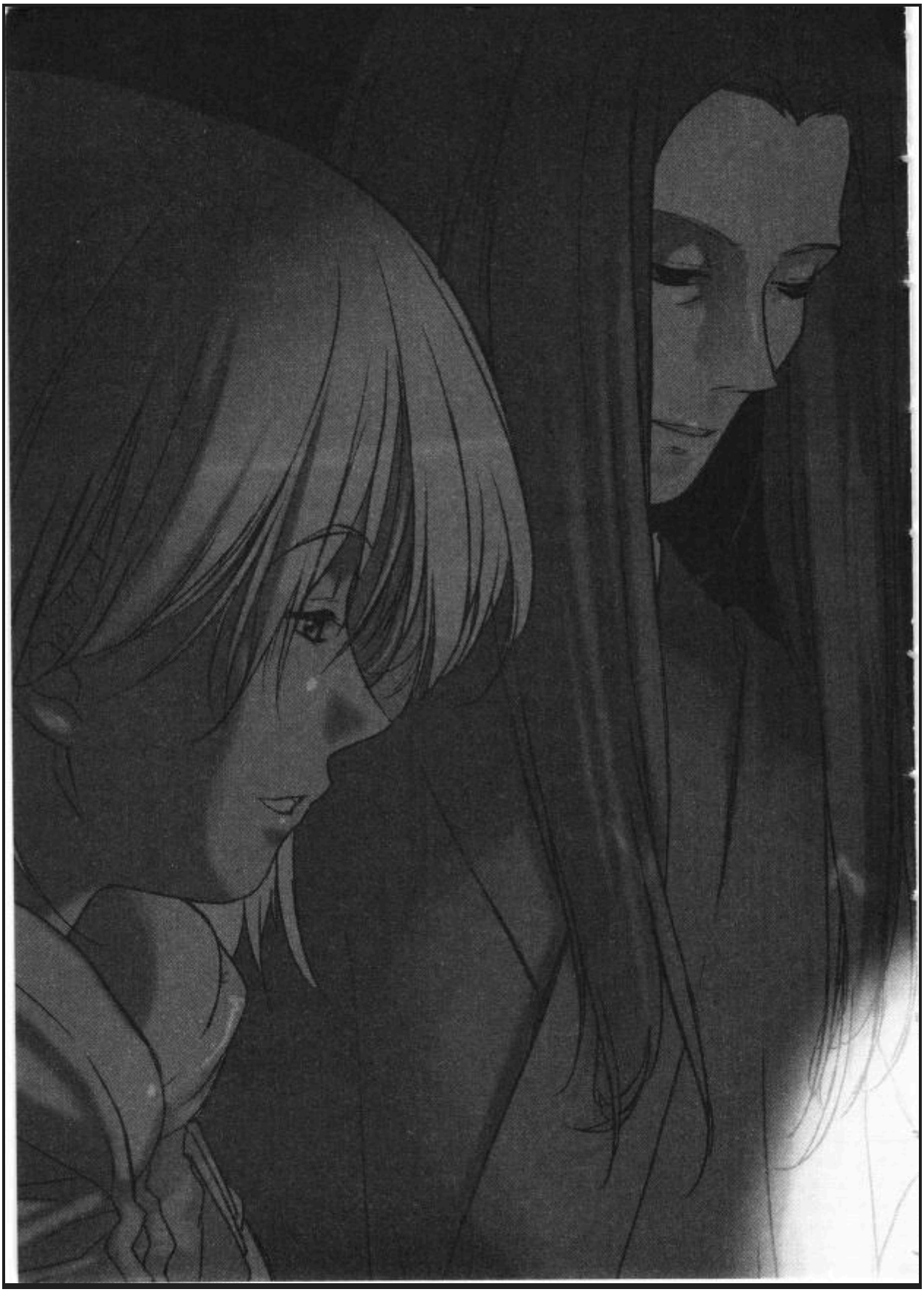
Jin chuckled. "And then the suffix 'useless big brother' gets attached, right?"

"Well, well, sometimes."

Jin looked toward Chaos with a smile still on his face. "Hehe, but it's strange, isn't it? I feel like I could talk to you about anything. I even get the feeling that you're far more mature than I am, like you've lived for hundreds of years."

"No way. I'm just a laid-back person by nature. That's why Canaan is always hounding me. 'You're slow,' he says."

The two figures exchanged quiet laughter. The sound of insects ceased. The moonlight emerging from the clouds bathed the hedge in white, and the night was filled with silence.



In the cockpit of the E.S. Simeon, the man with milky-white hair, opened his purple eyes wide with madness. Fourteen years ago, on the day he had faced U-DO in the U.R.T.V.'s mental link, a sensation had enveloped him—a sharp pain and pleasure like evolving while alive. He tried to imagine it within himself, but for the moment, he could not.

Outside, reflected on the screen, was the jet-black universe. Far below his eyes, the blue sphere of Second Miltia floated. Albedo quietly gazed at that distant blue ball.
—Ancient humans fantasized about a true spherical God.
"God is a sphere of wisdom whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere," was it?

Looking up at the sky for fourteen hundred years, humanity had remained trapped by Ptolemy's imagination. They had loved the heavens and hated the universe. However, even then, humanity was making the same mistake. They believed that the universe was closed off only to itself.

The fierce desire for an absolute transcendent being burned in his heart. Once, when he had mingled with U-DO, a supersense beyond imagination had overflowed within his body. Frightened, Rubedo had severed the link...

If he hadn't, he would have been able to reach the other side, beyond the confusion, at its furthest end. What was left instead was only this spirit, torn and fractured.

However, he was in no state of mind to blame Rubedo now.
Cowardice was rather a strength. Flight was the violence exerted by a gazelle on the plain. Looking at his former self, or perhaps at that utterly cowardly Dimitri Yuriev he found that the strength of a brother was something that should be blessed.

He thought, “If I can just connect with U-DO, a mere fourteen years will be a moment in time not worth counting. That time is very near at hand.
If I can just reach that place, perhaps all humanity will be freed from the lonely vessel of their respective time, and there will be no need to be individual lives in the first place. They may no longer be a being that can be called human, but my own pleasure takes priority; everything else is a trivial matter that comes with it.”

When he heard that Pellegri, full of vigor, had boarded the E.S. Issachar and then failed to capture Momo due to the Anima Vessel's resonance phenomenon, Albedo chuckled greatly to himself.

The U-TIC Organization was a gathering of people who always took many useless actions. They genuinely believed that diligently piling up plans was the only way to arrive at the truth. There was nothing that those stern-faced people like Margulis and Pellegri could ever grasp.

Albedo sank deep into his seat, a twisted smile carved on his cheek. Peshe[11] was already caught in a delicate trap. He had decided all the plans with his own hands when he had kidnapped her into the "Nephilim's Song" tower and violated the spirit of that Realien. All that was left was to wait. He couldn't reach the main body of the Y material, but he had found a trace. Rubedo would surely be useful.

In a good mood, he imagined the scene of that moment in his head.
It was a banquet of light and darkness, like a nebula, like a palace where ancient gods gathered. A microcosm of the universe woven by light and darkness using Peshe's body as a tableau. Joachim's orchestra was joined by his dissonance, mixing together a grand jumble of screams. It was a shame he couldn't witness the scene directly. At least by imagining it like this, he would make it his own pleasure.

Albedo slightly arched his back on the seat with a surge of lust that welled up while he kept a smile pasted on his face. Albedo frowned, feeling a strange sensation crawling through his nerves which were boiling with lust. Recalling the face of a familiar person, he suddenly felt a rush of amusement, and Albedo burst out laughing.

Coming across the jet-black universe, it was a jet-black appearance here, so to speak. Albedo, in a good mood, guided the nostalgic telepathic wave into his brain.
"Welcome to my skull. It isn’t a little too messy inside for the richest man in the Miltia solar system, is it Lord Gainan Kukai?"
"Well, you seem as pointlessly energetic as ever." Nigredo's voice, laced with sarcasm, echoed in his head. Albedo grimaced and laughed.

"What's wrong, have you gotten lonely because no one's paying attention to you?"
"Oh, nothing, I’m just doing a bit of information gathering. This is keeping me quite busy too. If you move around too much, it will mess up my schedule. Of course, I've left room in my schedule for peace negotiations."

Just as Nigredo could fully understand Albedo's situation, Albedo could largely grasp Nigredo's situation. Nigredo was wearing a stiff tweed jacket, leaning against a plain, unadorned wall. The location was probably the autonomous government's city hall.

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[11] *MOMO

Perhaps he had taken on the role of an explorer to protect documents. Albedo returned Nigredo's mocking laugh.
"Peace negotiations, huh? Fuhahahaha, I see a dagger shining in your sleeve. Show your true colors, executioner."

Nigredo's thought process momentarily paused as if in hesitation.
"I abandoned that role long ago," Nigredo's thoughts changed to a low tone.
Albedo filled his eyes with both sympathy and sarcasm.
"Did you? Aren't you sticking close to Rubedo, waiting for an opportunity to perform your duty? It's hard to escape the role you were born with. Kiheheheh, you could really use a grim reaper hood..."

If you wear a curtain, cling to the curtain. Hold your breath at the edge of the stage. You might get your turn eventually. But for now I'm borrowing you Rubedo. I'm really looking forward to your performance.

There was a dark stagnation in Nigredo's thoughts. Not killing intent or hatred, but a functional, cold urge to destroy. Albedo tried to forcibly cut off the telepathy, but suddenly a curiosity welled up in him and he relaxed his defenses instead.

The wave of Nigredo's consciousness flowing into his head deepened in color even more."Wait—" Nigredo said. The torrent of Nigredo's attack image flowed through his brain and into Albedo's body. The muscles and blood vessels in his right arm swelled, and the limb instantly doubled in thickness. His right arm exploded, and fresh blood splattered.

Albedo's joyful scream echoed in the cockpit of the E.S. Simeon. Laughter gradually mixed with the scream, turning into a high-pitched, crazy laugh. Albedo's eyes widened, shining brightly, reflecting the stars.
"Scary, scary. You've always been that kind of guy. Sharpening the fangs of death with a calm face."

From the wide-open, beautiful red wound, the disappeared right arm suddenly appeared. Albedo gripped his new hand and smiled contentedly.
"What's wrong? Don't be shy, come at me more. I will eternally dedicate my hand without compensation to your twisted labyrinth. So that you may wander forever."

Albedo half-closed his eyes and waited for the continuing shock, but Nigredo's thoughts were already clouded with confusion.
"As expected— no matter what, you intend to link with U-DO?" Nigredo said blankly.

Albedo didn't respond anymore, and teared up with a yawn of boredom. Instead, he sent a flood of wanton thought images. He generously wove in images that Nigredo would dislike: the figures of U.R.T.V. standard bodies whose links were cut by Rubedo and were writhing in pain; the standard bodies going mad and killing each other; Rubedo leaning his back against the wall and shouting noisily.

Most of Nigredo's suggestive ability depended on language use. Poor Nigredo would have a hard time surrounded by a smoke screen of images. However, the next moment, Albedo had already completely forgotten about Nigredo.

The images he played with ran wild, swallowing up the jet blackness in his head with a colorful torrent and washing it away. Thoughts popped and disappeared like bubbles from the place where they appeared one after another. Albedo scattered a loud laugh throughout the cockpit.

Albedo called out—not to Momo, but to the core beyond her.
The shining illusion, the tempter who only desires to shine. Therefore, you invite my pursuit, and you hide yourself at the altar of truth. The shining illusion, the innocent angel, therefore the beautiful heart will pursue. Dripping with a red image, not as a pursuer, but as one who loves you. But your brilliance blinds both eyes. Kihihihihi, Ahihihi!

Albedo plunged his thumbs into his own eye sockets and stirred his eyeballs. New eyeballs regenerating under his fingers trembled in ecstasy, reflecting the blue glow of Second Miltia.
"Now. You are not ducks. You are human. Seek the key to reaching Y, and go straight."

—Miltia Standard Time 805. Above Second Miltia.

The shuttle glided at high speed, heading for the U.M.N. Management Bureau. The sun, covered by clouds, illuminated the spires of the distant Bureau in a grayish white. Five hundred meters above, Yuri Mizrahi looked down at Second Miltia City from the shuttle window.

The city was greeting the morning. She had always liked this time of day. The formless slumber gradually moved towards order, and the hustle and bustle frozen by the night melted, adding color to the city.

In the cockpit, the pilot shouted in a loud voice that did not lose to the sound of the shuttle's engine.
"Thank you for your hard work. We will arrive in about twenty minutes!" Yuri Mizrahi nodded slightly for herself. Today at 13:00, finally, the analysis work on the legacy left by Joachim—the Y data—would begin. The young secretary next to her, half-asleep, opened his eyes slightly.

"Oh, are we arriving?"
"Not yet. Twenty more minutes. If you're sleepy, why don't you sleep a little more? It will be busy once we arrive."
"Dr. Mizrahi, your eyes are terrible. Why don't you rest a little?"

The secretary's concern was understandable. She had hardly slept the previous night. She couldn't sleep. Yuri stared at the holographic monitor of the PC swaying on her lap. A pseudo-nerve diagram of the Type 100 prototype was projected. Blinking and flickering, the simulation data looked almost alive.

Fourteen years had passed since that cursed Miltia conflict. She stood before the Y data, which people had feared the most and longed for the most. Usually, Yuri, who bore a heavy responsibility as one of the seven expert committee members representing a small committee of over two thousand people, felt a little different that day.

Joachim, who had been her husband; Joachim, who was the object of her hatred. She was attending the elucidation of the legacy of that man whom she probably never understood for even a moment. With a sense of obligation as a researcher and awe as a relative, her body felt like it was trembling just sitting still.

The petite Yuri clasped her small hands on her lap and desperately suppressed her feelings. She couldn’t let herself be captured by personal motives more than necessary. Protecting the data from dangerous forces and finishing the analysis one step ahead of them would guarantee the safety of countless humans throughout the star cluster.

For that reason, maintaining mental tension was the highest priority.
However, the more she tried not to think about it, the more old family portraits came to mind.

She had been despised and suspected as the wife of Joachim Mizrahi, because he was the cause of the Miltia conflict, and so she had lived immersed in work in the

post-conflict world. Joachim's face, which she hated so much, somehow had a gentle smile in her memory.

The cause was a single image data file. The only remaining photo of Joachim was a picture of the couple with their daughter, who had been unconscious since birth, in between them.

One had been the supreme commander of the notorious U-TIC organization. The other had been the developer of the biological weapons U.R.T.V. This scientist couple, for whom such an ordinary scene of family love was most unfitting, somehow looked very happy only in this image.

One day, five years after the Miltia conflict, suffering from extreme fatigue due to political pressure from the committee, she had scratched out Joachim's face and her own face in the image. In the middle of the two black faces, Sakura, about eight years old and wearing white clothes, vaguely looked at the camera.

However, Joachim's face, which should have been eternally erased as data, somehow left a strong impression on Yuri's mind. It remained in her heart without disappearing. It became a symbol of the longing for the hope that this small family could never reach.

When analyzing the Y material, this incident with the photo came back to her mind, and half of Yuri's heart screamed and wanted to run away. She had decided many times to push this responsibility onto someone else.

However, the other half that remained kept screaming. It told her that she must see through what Joachim had left behind and that she must arrive at the meaning of Sakura's death. That was her responsibility as the one left behind.

Yuri lowered her gaze to the image on the holographic monitor. The Type 100 Prototype was an artificial life form—to firmly tell herself that fact, she avoided images of Momo as a girl as much as possible. Even if she looked exactly like her daughter, she was something else.

The secretary rubbed her teary eyes and looked down at the city.
"I see. The highways are destroyed everywhere. Looks like the aftermath of a war."
Yuri also glanced outside. It was the claw marks left by the people who had attacked the city the day before to seize the material. The identity of the attackers was not

yet clear, but it was certain that they were a dangerous force to whom the Y material could never be handed over.

"Days of disaster continue for Second Miltia. It's a miracle that the Helmer administration, which continues to take a hard line, doesn't lose popular support. From our perspective, in continuing the solidarity between our Contact Subcommittee and the Miltian government, it should be called a stroke of luck in misfortune."
"Are all Milltian people stubborn?" the secretary muttered.
"Maybe so." Yuri nodded expressionlessly and averted her eyes from the congested highway.

"Is this MO.MO? The masterpiece Rarelien that became the ancestor of all Type 100 models, correct?" The secretary peered into the holo-monitor and said. "I can't believe that a key to the secrets of Zohar is hidden in something that looks like a little girl."
"Right," Yuri replied simply and closed her PC.

Through the front canopy, the administration bureau building, which was gradually approaching, came into view. For some reason, the face of that cyborg, Ziggurat-Eight, came to mind.
"Momo is happy to meet you."
"It's okay," she told herself. "I'm calm."

—Standard Time 830. U.M.N. Administration Bureau.

They landed at the port and disembarked onto the surface. The shuttle flew off, kicking up wind. Yuri held down her tangled hair and watched the shuttle disappear into the orange sky. There was a lot of traffic as usual, and that day the highway was cut off, so shuttles were constantly coming and going.

"...it’s here!"
"The Type 100 prototype and the people from the Foundation seem to have just arrived too!" The secretary, who was communicating with the inside via a headset, exclaimed.
"Who's here?" Yuri shouted back.
The secretary flipped through his notes and announced: "Well, the following people: Gaignun Kukai, Gaignun Jr., and Chaos as witnesses. Shion Uzuki and those from the Durandal bridge crew, who are scheduled to participate as analysis operators, and

several Type 100 Rareliens. And Ziggurat-Eight as an escort for the 100 series prototype."
Yuri tapped the secretary on the shoulder, removed the headset from his head, and said into his ear: "I'll greet them. Please guide me."

They went up the main elevator of the administration bureau building. When they reached the floor, the surroundings were naturally bustling. Staff members in U.M.N. uniforms were busy coming and going, preparing for the analysis operation.

They walked along the aerial corridor with an atrium structure toward the main floor. After passing through the entrance, they arrived at the central room. In a huge space several tens of meters long, countless material transfer service operation terminals were lined up closely, and staff members were busy with their work.

There were many huge screens overhead, relaying synchronization throughout the star cluster. At the access counter in front of them were the members of the Kukai Foundation, including Gaignun, who were just completing the arrival procedures.

The girl's pink hair caught her eye. She glanced next to her... Yuri saw Momo's face, and the image of her daughter flashed across her mind. Momo resembled her dead daughter far more than the other variations of the Type 100 Realiens. Yuri half-closed her eyes, took a deep breath so no one would notice, took her eyes off Momo, and approached Gaignun Kukai.

"Long time no see."
"I'm glad to see you're doing well."
Gaignun returned the greeting with a flawless gesture. Right behind Gaignun was a silver-haired young man, and next to him was Ziggy, or Ziggurat 8, whom Yuri knew. The red-haired boy—Jr.—was at the very back of the group, staring at Yuri with a probing look. Yuri exchanged glances with Jr. and was slightly unsettled again. Jr.'s quiet gaze seemed to see through Yuri's heart.

Near Ziggy, Yuri caught sight of Momo, her cheeks flushed with shyness, timidly watching Yuri's reaction. Yuri frowned slightly and faced Gaignun.
"Thank you for your efforts regarding the 'Heaven's Chariot' incident. On behalf of the subcommittee, please allow me to express my gratitude."

Gaignun gave a slight nod. Regarding the "Heaven's Chariot," most of the fallen base fragments had burned up, making investigation difficult. It was still a headache for the autonomous state government. It was the plant used to create Momo, but the

incident itself had happened only a few days prior. The search and investigation could not be completed in time for that day's analysis work.
Ziggy spoke from the side.
"It's also thanks to Momo. Without Momo's observation capabilities, it would have taken time to grasp the internal situation, and detaching the base would have been impossible. The 'Heaven's Chariot' would have crashed into Second Miltia City with its full mass, causing immense damage."

For the first time, Yuri looked closely at the pink-haired girl. Momo hid behind Ziggy, looking up at Yuri expectantly.
"I see, well done, Momo," Yuri said in a flat voice.

"Mama," Momo said with an expression of emotion. Yuri silently walked past Momo, who was about to say something else, and stopped in front of Jr. who glared at Yuri with a reproving look. A small anger welled up in Yuri's chest.

"Why you too? You should understand how I feel." She said in as calm a voice as possible. "I need a quiet place to work. Will you show me?"
"Gladly," Jr. nodded sullenly.

Saying goodbye to the Gaignun group, she remembered the words she should say as she left. It was a line she had decided to say if she met them since the night before. She looked back and called Momo's name.

"When things calm down, it would be nice if we could live together."
"Yes," Momo replied cheerfully, her face instantly beaming with a full smile. Her eyes shined, reflecting the image on the screen above her head. Yuri felt goosebumps, averted her eyes, and urged her guide forward. The guide, bewildered, lagged a few steps before hastily walking ahead of Yuri.

The room they were guided to was a small room across from the analysis facility. The situation in the analysis room was displayed on monitors lined up on the wall. Yuri sat on a chair, feeling a slight weariness, and pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers.

Even though they had only exchanged a few words, the conversation with Momo seemed to have used up more nerves than expected. Her chest still felt tight. If she was like that before the analysis even began, she worried about what lay ahead.

It was highly unlikely that Joachim would leave behind the Y material exposed and neglected. Careful work requiring extreme tension would continue.
The guide rested one hand on the desk and stared intently at one point.

Yuri's eyes stopped at his profile. His appearance, unchanged, still that of a boy—this young man should have been twenty-six years old that year. His unchanging appearance made her remember her daughter even more.

The boy, Sakura, and Yuri. Once, the boy's face, reporting his daughter's words with a little pride, was preserved exactly as it was there.
She naturally understood what he wanted to say. He had remained silent the entire time he guided her there, silently blaming Yuri.

"Think more about Momo. I'm thinking about her as much as possible. But any more than this—what should I do? Love is not an emotion you can create or control yourself."

When Joachim first reported the manufacturing of the Type 100 to Yuri, he had told her it was actually for her daughter's treatment. For a while after her daughter died, Yuri had been in no condition to work. She had empathized with her daughter's suffering and had days when she couldn't even go outside.

And then, around the time she could finally walk alone, in Joachim's laboratory, she witnessed Realiens who looked exactly like her dead daughter. She learned for the first time that Joachim's research had continued even after her daughter died. The development was already nearing completion.

Seeing Joachim's state, Yuri was convinced that her husband's mind was possessed by something. How could she possibly feel genuine affection for something like that? She couldn't see it as a living creature. The more affection it poured on her, the more she felt a sense of discomfort. Yuri clenched her fist tightly, intending to scold herself, and then spoke to the guide, who still showed no sign of leaving.

"Do you need something?"
"Yuri-san, what's wrong?" he finally opened his mouth, still looking down.
"What do you mean?" Yuri looked sideways and up.
He looked straight at Yuri with his blue eyes.
"Suddenly, you're saying kind words to Momo."
"Was that unnatural?" Yuri reached out and traced the dust on the edge of the monitor.

"Joakim designed that realien to be motivated by the stimulus of family warmth, right? If so, isn't it a necessary action for performing my duties to satisfy that value so that future investigations proceed smoothly?"
"As expected, you’re acting that way because it's for work..." He frowned as if enduring pain rather than scolding. "It's you, Yuri-san, who always pretends to be a cold person and then gets hurt later."

Yuri stared intently at the trace her finger had left on the edge of the monitor.
"It was Joachim who made that realien—that's what I'm afraid of."
He stood silently for a while.
"I don't know what kind of person Joachim Mizrahi was. Or what his intentions were in creating the Type 100. But—I made a promise to Sakura."

"To Sakura?" Yuri looked up.
"So, I intend to treat Momo as a child her age."
"What kind of promise did you make?"
"To always watch over my mom and sister."

Yuri tightly pursed her lips to hide her agitation. Her heart was struck by Sakura's distant love. But then a question popped into her head, and she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Did Sakura know Momo would be born? How? Momo would reach her completed form after Sakura's death.

Besides, he didn't seem to have noticed, but the fact that she asked such a thing—didn't that mean their daughter secretly anticipated her own death?
"Yuri-san, please smile again. Sakura must have wished for that too."
Yuri placed the document case and PC onto the desk. If she didn't, her knees would tremble and she would drop them.

A line invisible to Yuri was secretly connecting Sakura and Momo. Was it that in the gap of the imaginary space where Sakura's consciousness lived, there was a trace of the future Momo?
—Joachim, what on earth have you created?

Before she knew it, her heart was filled with sadness. Not knowing anything, she was the only one left alive out of the three people in that photo. What was left behind was a single mysterious Realien named Momo. Yuri and the guide stared at each other in silence for a while after that.

Feeling uncomfortable, Yuri slowly stood up and walked past him. At that moment, she desperately wanted to face the legacy known as the Y Materials. Not from the standpoint of a specialist, but as a single researcher. As a single mother, she wanted to talk to Momo a little.

—Standard Time 11:00.

She gave instructions for the final fine-tuning of the analysis equipment and completed the inspection of the workflow materials. In between preparing for analysis, Momo kept talking to Yuri. Just exchanging words seemed to make the girl so happy. Yuri hid her agitation as much as possible and made trivial conversation. She felt a certain impatience, as if handling something fragile.

—Standard Time 11:30. Adjustment Room.

Yuri headed to the administration bureau's adjustment room, a little distance from the main floor. Opening the door, she saw Ziggurat-Eight lying on a mechanical chair. Cables extending from the adjustment bed were plugged into various parts of the cyborg's artificial body. Ziggy had his eyes closed as if sleeping.

Yuri was surprised by this man's consideration for Momo, and also secretly grateful. It seemed he had supported Momo not only physically but also emotionally, in a way Yuri could never do. Yuri did not know the details of what kind of days this man and Momo had spent together.
If asked where his impression had changed, she couldn't explain it well, but it seemed different compared to when he was first summoned.

Had his request for the committee, "I want my human memories deleted once my mission of guarding Momo is over”, not changed yet?
"How are you doing?" she called out.

On the adjustment bed, Ziggy quietly opened his eyes wide.
"—Dr. Mizrahi??"
Yuri approached the adjustment bed's control panel.
"Momo asked me to. She said, 'Mom is a famous scientist, so she knows a lot about cybernetic engineering, right?'"

"No, the adjustment..."

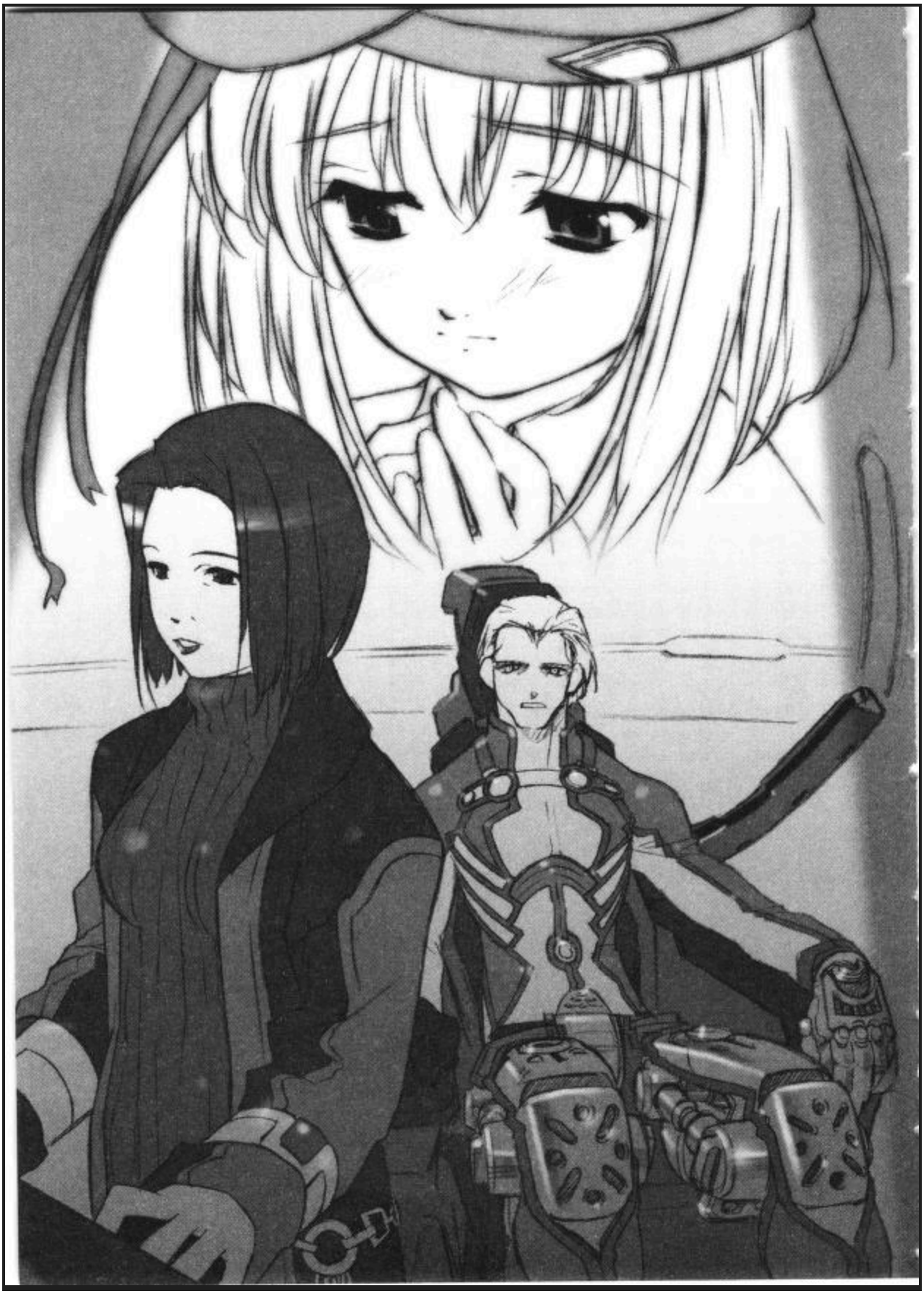
Ziggy floated his body off the bed. The tangled cables rubbed against each other, making a noise. Even in a mechanical body, he seemed to have resistance to having every corner of his body known to a person of the opposite sex. Yuri smiled and gently pushed Ziggy back onto the adjustment bed.

"I am not a young woman anymore, don't worry about it."
She approached the control panel and continued her work. The wear and tear on his artificial body was severe, telling the story of the intense journey so far. Most of the wounds were probably from trying to protect Momo. For a while, neither of them spoke a word.

"Relax, I'm a famous scientist—or infamous, I would say," Yuri said.
"You seem to dislike Momo, why is that?" Ziggy said with his eyes closed.
Yuri thought for a moment before answering.

"Could you love a thing that is not your daughter, but has the same face as her?"
"That is a difficult question."
"Even if the appearance is made to resemble my daughter, her soul will not return. The Type 100 units scattered throughout the star cluster—that appearance constantly thrusts my daughter's death upon me."
She had inadvertently revealed her long-standing suffering.

"Was it your husband who made the Type 100 look like they do now?"
"Yes."
She did not know why she had told him this story. She knew almost nothing about this man. He had committed suicide, had been swallowed up by the life-recycling system of the time, and was cyborgized. And whenever a problem arose, he was activated and forced into localized missions. That was all.



She barely knew him from when he was human.
However, maybe she could talk about it precisely because she didn't know him. For example, she could never have had this conversation with her superior. She would first have thought about how much she would hurt that young man if she said such things.

"Do you have children?"
"One son. He was a healthy, smart boy, but I lost him in an accident."
Ziggy said this continuously with his eyes closed. Yuri stopped working.
"I'm sorry—is that why you committed suicide?"
"Yes—that's right."
"When my daughter died, maybe I should have done the same. But my anger towards my husband filled the place that grief should have occupied."

Ziggy was silent for a moment, thinking, then said:
"You're probably a strong woman."
"No, I'm just stubborn."
"Dr. Mizrahi," Ziggy opened his eyes.

"This is just my opinion, but could you try to think of it as though you had two daughters?"
"What do you mean?"
"One who passed away, and one who is still alive."

"Treating Momo not as a copy of my daughter, but as an individual? That's quite a difficult task you're giving me..."
"Please consider it."
"I'll think about it. I need to go soon. The secretary is probably running around with a pale face looking for me."

Yuri laughed and left the control panel.
—A conversation with a cyborg as a refuge, huh?
Thinking a little ironically, her heart was still strangely calm.
"I should go too. I want to be present for Momo's analysis."

She stopped Ziggy with her hand as he tried to get up.
"There's still time. If you want to be present, just come to the analysis room by 13:00. If possible, please come healthy."

Ziggy laid back down on the adjustment bed.

"Thanks for the adjustment."
"You're welcome."
Yuri waved one hand in response.

——————Standard time 12:50.

They were guided to a separate room. Helmer, the representative for Second Milita, arrived just in time. To attend the analysis work, all U.M.N. staff responsible for the operation, including Type 100 Realiens skilled in high-speed computing, were seated in the analysis room in front of their respective terminals, awaiting the start time for the operation.

"Helmer is here too... the situation somehow feels similar to my daughter's treatment scene from before," Yuri thought, looking at Gaignun Kukai standing next to her.
"Another daughter." Ziggy's words remained in her head.

She thought it was an effective way of thinking, even as a placebo, as a bypass to escape the emotions she had suffered from for many years. She was able to think this way because she knew that the man named Jean Saur had gone through a similar experience to her own.

Hearing from Shion that Sakura, who somehow sensed Momo's birth, had recognized her as a younger sister was also a contributing factor.
Through the glass, she could see Momo floating on the adjustment bed. Next to her were Ziggy, who had finished his adjustments, and Mary from the Foundation.

The three's conversation could be heard through the speakers.
<Don't worry, Momo-chan. This is just preparation for the analysis.>
<Yes, I'll do my best! Momo is a self-adjusting type, so this is my first time on a bed for adjustments since activation. Being adjusted like this makes me feel like Ziggy, doesn't it?>
<It's okay, there's no need to be afraid.>
Ziggy nodded, encouraging Momo.

A Type 100 Realien operating a console announced through a headset microphone.
<To proceed with the analysis, the simulated personality layer will be deactivated. Simulated emotional expression and functions will temporarily stop, but please do not worry.>
It was then that Momo's face first tensed up.
<Simulated, emotions—> Momo's faint whisper, filled with anxiety, was heard from the speakers.

<The simulated personality is merely an option for interpersonal interaction, so it has no effect on the observation function itself.>
<Momo's heart is just an optional function—>
<Personality layer, sleep complete. Functions stopping.>
<Ah—>

The Type 100 tapped the console with efficient operations.
With a final breath-like sound, the strength supporting Momo's body vanished. She looked like a small doll just floating haphazardly. Her hollow gaze pointed toward the sky. Yuri felt a pain in her chest and realized she had somehow become emotionally invested in Momo. She lowered her eyes, switched on the microphone placed in her hand.

<I am Yuri Mizrahi. I have been delegated supervisory authority for this analysis work by the Contact Subcommittee...>

The standard time was 13:00.

They then began the selection and analysis of the encrypted Y material in the deep domain of the Type 100 Prototype MOMO’s memory.
A blue lamp indicating <ANALYSIS IN PROGRESS> was flashing overhead.
There was no change in the map of Momo's neural network projected onto the giant screen overhead.

More than five hours had passed since the work began.
A full body trace had been completed, but the Y material had still not appeared. Only the existence of a navigation column to the Old Miltian space area, which was part of the material, was confirmed.

This part of the data was expected from the beginning and was not a surprising discovery. However, if a corridor to the Old Miltian space area opened, the Committee and the Miltian government would exclusively secure the path leading to the original Zohar.

The operation members were completely silent except for the minimum communication necessary for the work, and were engrossed in the repeated work. They broke through each data barrier by applying several patterns of decoders.
Yuri watched over the working members from the wall where she could see the whole picture.

The figure of their superior had disappeared from the analysis room. He probably couldn't bear to watch. It was an event from his sensitive boyhood. For Yuri too, Momo's motionless figure overlapped with that of her daughter.

"Decoding the final barrier pattern. Entering full protection release," the Type 100 announced.
Tension filled the room, and silence fell. The sound of the Type 100 typing on the console echoed in the room.

"Dr. Mizrahi, Momo is..." Ziggy opened his mouth.
Yuri looked toward the analysis bed Ziggy was indicating.
The girl lay with her eyes open blankly. Only her mouth was moving, saying something.
"Momo is—saying something. Turn up the volume," Yuri told the nearby operator.

Mary, who was next to her, impatiently looked up at the ceiling speaker.
"Momo-chan?"
<No...>> Momo's voice, almost swallowed by static.
<Momo-chan? What's wrong? Do you want to say something?>>
Mary's voice, who had jumped to the mic, echoed through the analysis room.
(Momo-chan? What's wrong? Do you want to say something?)
<This is a, tr, ap...>> and the voice cut off.

A tension ran down Yuri's spine. Momo's voice seemed like the signal that something planted in the Y material was finally starting to move.
"What is this—!" one of the U.M.N. staff members cried out in a hoarse voice.

The room was instantly noisy with the daily screams of the operators.
"Large amounts of interference from the invisible region via high-speed language has occurred!"
"Defense logic collapse 68%, emergency shutdown—"
"Rejected. Terminal is open to U.M.N. Cannot specify intrusion route!"
"Multiple connections of axons are progressing in the deep region, and a large-scale holographic network is being newly configured!"

An anomaly was occurring in the neural network diagram of Momo projected on the screen. The points of light that began to flicker in various parts of her body suddenly started flowing all at once, and like tributaries gathering to form a great river, they became a large stream of light that illuminated the screen.
"Dr. Mizrahi, what is this ..." Ziggy's face asking the question was stained white by the flickering light of the screen.

Yuri muttered blankly. "Even if we analyze each system one by one, we shouldn't find anything. Each layer itself is like a fragment of memory with low-resolution fragments scattered about. Only when everything is activated at the same time does the whole picture emerge." The light emitted by the screen stained Yuri's face white.
"Joachim's magnificent trompe-l'œil."

Yuri came to her senses and shouted to everyone in the analysis room.
"Re-execute shutdown, rebuild the defense logic against external hacking."
"Attempting to restart the defense logic."
The operator's scream-like voice echoed.
"Rejected!"

"Shut up for a minute. Momo-chan is still saying something!" Mary shouted.
The voice from the speaker mixed with the sound of sand.
(I'm sorry. Momo I didn't notice)
Yuri's face turned pale. Something had happened. A hunch crossed her mind.

No. This was—not Joachim.
She felt the presence of a deep malice, a trap set by another human.
"There is a self-expanding trap. This was probably recently set by another person. It was set up to be automatically opened to U.M.N. once all barriers disappeared.

“Do you have any ideas?"
Ziggy was silent for a while. He twisted his face, and muttered.

"What I can think of is the time at the tower of the <Song of Nephilim>—that man, Albedo."
"Albedo" Yuri muttered the name blankly.

If this continued, the Y-data would be temporarily disclosed to every human living in this universe. Not all of the data, but at least a part of it, the disconnected data for the Old Miltian space area.
The key to repairing the U.M.N. column would likely flow out.
Humans would rush in. War would begin again.
If that happened, countless desires for the original Zohar would swirl in the old Miltia space.

"Twenty seconds until defense logic collapses! At this rate, there's a risk all data will leak!" The Type 100, who should have been mild-mannered, announced in a state of severe distress.
Why? How did it come to this?
Joachim's smile, painted completely black, flashed across her mind.

She looked up sadly at the screen. The map of Momo's neural network projected on the screen was still blinking violently.
Given the situation, she had an obligation to fulfill.
She ran to a nearby terminal and pushed the operator aside. The operator cried out and fell onto the floor.

"Dr. Mizrahi, what are you doing!" Ziggy shouted from behind.
Yuri frantically struck the console and shouted back.
"I'm going to use the emergency control code to discard the data."
"Idiot. If you do that, Momo will—" Ziggy roared.
"It can't be helped. We absolutely must prevent the Y material from being stolen! If that happens, many humans living in the star cluster will be in mortal danger. War will begin!"

For a moment—she saw Momo through the glass. Her small body was resistant to everything, and if she hit one key now, all of that would disappear.
—Joachim, why did you entrust everything to such a child?
Yuri gasped violently for breath.
—If I hit this one key, everything will disappear.
Her trembling finger moved back and forth between the key and the empty space repeatedly.

She had to press it. But something screaming in her heart held back Yuri's hand reaching for the key.
"My other daughter. Protect Mom and your sister."
Yuri clenched her hand into a fist. She couldn't cut off that existence that was surely there now, that had been smiling earnestly at her just a few hours ago.
"—Momo," Yuri whispered.

A U.M.N. staff member shouted.
"Dr. Mizrahi! The holographic network has begun self-destruction. The deployment data is disappearing."
Yuri stared blankly at her clenched fist.
"No—I still haven't..."

The light of Momo's network diagram on the overhead screen gradually weakened and then disappeared.
"What’s going on?!" Ziggy questioned Yuri fiercely. Yuri answered in a whisper:
"Momo—Momo is severing her neural circuits and dispersing her memory herself. To protect what was entrusted to her by Joachim. She intends to self-destruct her mind."
"What did you say?" Ziggy roared.
No one could stop it. Everyone looked up at the screen helplessly.
And then—everything went black.

"Type 100 Prototype, system function stopped!"
After that cry, all voices disappeared from the analysis room. Everyone was silently and dazedly contemplating the meaning of what had happened. The Y-data was protected intact.

For that purpose, the Type 100 Prototype, Momo, died.
Yuri's throat trembled with emotion.
Momo's holographic image disappeared from the screen, and a man's face appeared largely in its place. The man with milky white hair had a twisted smile on his cheek, and looked in this direction with a hatefully shining eye.

《Hey, you liked the gift, didn't you?》
"Is that—Albedo!?!?!"
Yuri traced her faint memory. The figure of a white-haired boy in her memory. There was no longer the look of the boy from the days of the U-TIC Institute.

《It seems the Mizrahi Legacy was protected with all Peche's might. How admirable. Waiting for the miracle of becoming human, led on by Mizrahi's nonsense. A wooden doll made by painting over the dead bodies of a beloved angel.》
"A wooden doll, you say?" Ziggy's face stiffened with anger.
Leaving an unpleasantly dripping laugh from the speaker, Albedo's figure disappeared from the screen.

Ziggy turned around.
"Dr. Mizrahi, Momo!?!?!"
Yuri looked across the glass in a hurry. The small girl whose life had ended. Goosebumps ran all over her body. The figure of the dead girl flashed in her mind.

"I will resuscitate her! I won't let her die—"
Yuri rushed out of the operation booth and ran towards the analysis bed where Momo floated powerlessly. The world lost its color, and her thoughts spun around rapidly. Her memory went back dizzyingly, seeking a manual to help a dead Realian. She yelled into the built-in microphone.

"Inject repair nano-units! Prepare twelve syringes of element activator!"
She lifted Momo from the analysis bed. There was no sign of life in the body she held.
"This time, I'll save you. This time!"
Yuri tensed her arms, putting her weight into pressing Momo's heart. She desperately kept knocking on the door, seeking the last remaining fragments of life deep within the small body.

A dark, vast circular hall. Hundreds of flat screens were haphazardly arranged in the air, each displaying the face of a star system representative council member. It was the magnificent assembly hall where the Stellar Federation council members gathered. The faces of the council members floated around the central tower, conducting the proceedings.

Today's agenda was the discussion of a fleet dispatch by the "Immigration Fleet." Once, when humanity set sail into the endless universe, this "Immigration Fleet" was the organization that commanded the voyage. Its activities, which once flourished across the entire stellar cluster and rivaled the Stellar Federation in power, had become relatively calm over the past few decades.

However, in the last few years, their organization had become active again. They had been successively manipulating stellar council members and building a secret network of power.
The man was one such council member, bought by the Immigration Fleet.
He stood in front of a giant screen, using its black surface as a mirror to reflect his smirking face and adjust his attire.

Everything was proceeding as planned.
When he heard that the Type-100 prototype had been recaptured by Second Miltia, the bug of self-preservation stirred again, but it was all a false alarm.
Now, more than ever, he was reminded of the immense power of the organization he belonged to. The traps were double and triple, and the core of the stellar cluster was expected to fall into the hands of the Immigration Fleet before long.

One of the council members spoke in a heated tone.
"Why does the Immigration Fleet need to dispatch a fleet to Miltia now?"
The man sent a call sign requesting to speak to the central tower and made his voice echo through the assembly hall.
"Well, there's no need to get so agitated. Why not listen to their side of the story?"

The tower gave a "permission" sign.
"I am grateful for the opportunity to speak."
The figure of the Pope, the representative of the Immigration Fleet, appeared large.

The Pope said resonantly:
"---Once, the land called Miltia existed in this space. As is well known, that land was sealed fourteen years ago due to an event, along with humanity's greatest legacy. Now, no one can approach that space. Originally, that legacy was the property of all humanity and had been managed by our Immigration Fleet since ancient times. However, due to unavoidable circumstances..."

《There are forces trying to take this legacy's power for themselves by using the opportunity》
One of the parliament members raised an objection.
《Wait. Currently, Zohar's management is under the jurisdiction of the federal government. Isn't it you who just want to monopolize that great legacy?》

The Pope smiled faintly.
《That is an outrageous thing to say. The reason it has been managed by our hands since ancient times is not for one force to monopolize that power. It is because it was the best choice for humanity that we, who are well-versed in that legacy, manage it. I would like you to reconsider the matter of fleet dispatch that we appealed for. I am saying that it is not us who are plotting a monopoly, but someone else》
《Surely, you don't mean the Miltia government is, do you?》
The Pope nodded and continued.

《Taking advantage of the incident fourteen years ago, they justified their use of military force, and as a symbol of that power, they made the great evil called the Celestial Wheel appear in this world, trying to reignite conflict in this world. Look at the Kukai Foundation, which is essentially their internal organization. They have all twelve Zohar Emulators left after the Miltia conflict, haven't they?

Wake up. Their goal is to use all the relics of Old Miltia for their own selfish desires amidst the chaos of the conflict. We assert our conventional autonomy against the Miltia government, who are the abominable usurpers! I repeat, this is not for the sake of our single force. It is for the safety, honor, and order of all humanity!》

The Pope fell silent, as if listening to his own words echoing through the assembly hall. A murmur spread.
《Wasn't the previous matter due to the U-TIC Organization's crime, and wasn't the Miltia government cleared of suspicion? I heard there is also evidential data from Vector?》The man spoke again.

《No, there are rumors that Vector is siding with the Miltia government. How much can that data be trusted? The Miltia government representative is nowhere to be found, aren't they?》 Someone shouted.

《What is Representative Helmer doing? Is there no explanation on this matter?》
The assembly hall fell into chaos, but Helmer did not appear at all. In the confusion, bust-up images of the shouting parliament members successively grew larger and smaller, agreeing with each other and then cursing each other again.

【Chapter 4】Yuriev's Cageless Bird

Shion looked at Momo's pale face. Momo was floating again on the analysis bed. Thanks to Yuri's appropriate treatment, Momo's life was barely saved.

However, that was just barely clinging to life. All nerve fibers had been severed, and Momo's consciousness remained isolated from the outside world. Given time, that consciousness would gradually be lost, and Momo would face a quiet and certain death.

Shion closed her clearly wide-open eyes. Shion bit her lip.

Despite telling Yuri to "take good care of Momo," he couldn't save her from the crisis himself. Even worse, he couldn't even be by her side at that time. He ran away at the crucial moment, as always.

Yuri stood frozen beside Momo, looking down at her with red, swollen eyes. She seemed to have regained some composure from her previous distraught state.
The only remaining method to save Momo was to directly access her deep consciousness in an Encephalon space—a space where consciousness was mapped onto the U.M.N.—and reintegrate her spirit.

Encephalon space was a virtual space created by combining the subject's endogenous memories and subjective images within the brain, external mechanical assistance, and the phenomenon called U.M.N. If they went to its deepest part, there was a possibility of finding Momo's closed-off consciousness.

In response to this situation, Helmer, the representative of the autonomous state government stationed at the U.M.N. administration bureau, formally requested cooperation from Vector Industries.

Vector had a monopoly on the manufacture of the black box (OEM), which was the central nervous system part of Realiens. That technology was indispensable for reproducing the Realiens' minds on the U.M.N.

"The equipment for the Encephalon Dive transferred from the Third Development Bureau will be connected directly to the analysis room. The operation booth already has extensive functions for searching the nervous system, mainly the brain, so that's convenient in that respect. The connection to the U.M.N. for constructing the virtual space is also fine."

Saying that in a tense, stern voice, Shion silently watched Yuri's retreating figure as she walked to the booth. Through the glass of the booth, Allen Ridgeley waved to Shion Uzuki, who was adjusting Momo's analysis bed for the Encephalon procedure, giving her a signal.

Initially, personnel from three divisions were meant to be dispatched, but instead, these two arrived from Vector. "We also want to help Momo-chan, who tried to protect her father's will with her life." Shion said with a determined expression. She seemed unable to hide her shock at the effective death of a girl named Momo, with whom she had become close.

Shion had originally wanted to join the Third Development Division, but she possessed quite deep knowledge of Realian neurophysiology. Allen also originally served as the chief of KOS-MOS's Encephalon training in the First Development Division. Furthermore, both knew Momo well. In an Encephalon Dive, which delved into the deep layers of the mind, this was a more important factor than any technology or knowledge.

The team conducting the analysis work had already withdrawn from the operation booth, leaving only a few staff members with Encephalon technology. An Encephalon Dive could be executed with a small number of people.

Besides the Chief and Jr., Chaos and Ziggy also requested to participate as subjects for the dive. The four of them, with tense expressions, surrounded the bed where Momo's body floated.

The four subjects fixed red goggles to their heads. These goggles served as the medium connecting the Encephalon space and the subjects.
Allen's voice could be heard through the microphone from the operation booth.
"The dive subjects are the Chief, Ms. Shion, Mr. Chaos, and Mr. Ziggy. Also, we have arranged to have KOS-MOS data simultaneously sent into the Encephalon from the Second Division. She will be reassuring to have around."

When Shion thanked Allen via her headset microphone, Allen scratched his head happily in the booth. Allen Ridgeley did not directly participate in the dive. He fulfilled the role of backup operator from the outside, constructing and maintaining the Encephalon space.

"The dive target is the deep region of Momo Mizrahi, structured with Sakura Mizrahi's memory as a model. There is a possibility that not only the memories within Momo-chan but also the memories of those who shared adjacent space and time axes will be resonantly regenerated."

Jr. gazed at Momo's figure floating on the bed. This was not the first time he had performed an Encephalon Dive on a girl whose normal consciousness had ceased. In the depths of his heart, he had very nostalgic and sad memories.
When Jr. looked towards the operation booth, Yuri was looking back at him with sad eyes.

"It means that the memories of people who were in contact with Sakura might be regenerated simultaneously inside the Encephalon structure. In that case, it's probably my memories," Jr. said.
Ziggy in front of him opened his mouth.
"I heard from Dr. Mizrahi that Sakura Mizrahi suffered from an organic disorder of the central nervous system… …so he had experience interacting with her?"
Jin nodded.

"Sakura's symptoms were congenital, and it was thought they had some connection to the wave anomaly latent in the U.M.N.. Her treatment was conducted at the Yuriev Institute, doubling as a U.R.T.V. U.M.N. connection training for us. I never imagined I'd visit this white garden cage again in such a way."
Jr. bit his back teeth hard. Ziggy silently watched the hill.
"What is it, old man? Going to tell me to be calm again?"
Ziggy shook his head.

"Before we dive, there's one thing I want to ask. It's always bothered me. What is U-DO? Why were you U.R.T.V.s created for U-DO countermeasures?"
"Why ask that now?"
"If we're going to the place where the U.R.T.V.s were born, I need to know. Besides, that man Albedo said the reason he's after Momo is to connect with U-DO."
Jin fell silent. Remembering it still made his skin crawl.

Fourteen years ago, at the end of the Miltian conflict, they, the U.R.T.V.s, confronted U-DO. And as a result, the gears broke.
"U-DO, or more accurately, the Unus Mundus Drive Operation System. Just hearing the name, it sounds like a control AI for the U.M.N., but it's not man-made. That's just a palatable name.

We were initially made to believe that too. That it was an artificial consciousness with dangerous waves, lurking in the U.M.N.. That was a lie. Our father, Dr. Dimitri Yuriev, knew everything.

Even we, who are anti-existences to it, the U.R.T.V.s, don't know its exact true identity. It's an energy from a higher domain, recklessly controlled by human hands. That's what it is."
"If we U.R.T.V.s, designed as anti-existences to U-DO, cause an anti-existence collision with U-DO, an energy capable of wiping out an entire space domain will rage.

I, as the leader, feared that and forcefully severed the mental connection. But it wasn't in time. The contaminated Albedo went mad, and yet, for some reason, continues to strongly seek reconnection with U-DO.

I, or Canaan, don't know what that means. Other than that it's a dangerous act that could cause a localized event shift."
"U-DO," Shion said the name like a sigh.

Allen's voice came from the speaker.
Inner Connection《Encephalon build, complete. Non-local connection, ready to start anytime》
"OK, begin," Shion raised one hand as a signal.
《I'm a professional at this job, you know. Everyone, please go ahead with peace of mind》"Yeah, we're counting on you." Shion's words made Allen's expression instantly soften. He returned to a serious face and lightly cleared his throat.

"KOS-MOS data transfer confirmed. Rebuilding start."
The configuration data of the four bodies flowed through goggles into the Encephalon space based on Sakura's memories.
"Direct approach, all preparations OK."
"Alright, let's go!" Jin shouted.

Taking a breath, they were in a white light.
"Where is this?" Shion looked around and up at the pale blue sky. There were light clouds, as if sprayed with an atomizer.
"It's Sakura's inner world, latent in Momo's deep domain," Jin said.

Ziggy, Chaos, and KOS-MOS appeared one after another around them.
It was a small, two-story house surrounded by a fence. Both the fence and the house itself were painted white. They stood inside the fence.
Small trees grew in the garden, and when a white, shining wind touched the branches, it scattered green light.

The distant view was gentle hills, with nothing obstructing the view around them.
It was a beautiful house, but at the same time, it was a lonely house, the only one in this world. A bench was hanging from the eaves of the house's entrance, swaying slightly. A pink-haired girl was sitting there. Jin rushed towards Momo.
"Momo? Momo, are you safe? Can't you hear me? Answer me!"
The pink-haired girl didn't answer anything. She was just sitting there motionless with hollow eyes on the bench that was suspended by chains and could be swung like a swing.

"It's useless, Jin. She won't answer."
"Why? She's right here!"
"She is currently in a state where her personality layer is suspended. Moreover, her neural network is severed. She can't understand us. I don't even know if she can hear our questions."
"That's—damn it!"

"The Momo-chan here is purely a product of the unconscious mind. Even if she takes some kind of action, it's just a conditioned reflex." Shion looked at Momo with sad eyes."Momo-chan, even in this state, she's trying her best to help us."
Jin took Momo's hand and slowly helped her stand up. He tried to call out, but his chest tightened and nothing came out.

"What are you doing? There's no time. Are you going to worry Momo any more?" Ziggy said.
"I know. Momo—just a little more patience."
Momo took his hand and followed without any resistance, floating along.
And then—they opened the door of that white house.

It seemed like a long, ominous night had dawned, and when the morning dew disappeared, the other side of the window glass was the usual clear pattern.
The girl on the bed thought that the same day as always was beginning.
So, she overslept as usual.

The sun shining in from the window was warming the futon. Here, no matter how much she slept, no matter how late she stayed up, no one came to wake her up, and no one scolded her. This was her world, so she could do as she pleased. Sometimes that was very lonely. However, that day was actually a completely different day.
The beginning of the anomaly was a breeze that rudely entered through the window.
And the fact that the closet placed against the wall of the room spoke.

"It hurts. It hurts, I tell you."
"Idiot, don't stick that on me."
The sound of the double doors opening was heard.
Her heart pounded. Something had entered the room.

The girl half-opened her eyes on the bed and observed the situation in the room.
It wasn't the first time someone had come here.
But everyone who had visited here until now was like a vague shadow, not saying anything to her, and she couldn't hear their voices.
However, today's intruders were different. The three clearly visible figures were clearly in the form of children.

The girl remembered the fairy tales her mom used to read to her. Only the hair and eye color were different, but the three of them had the same face.
But of course, she knew that fairies didn't exist in this world. She knew she was a sick person who had been cut off from the real world and couldn't talk to anyone.
So she was really surprised when she heard the boys talking.

"Did we get the grounding coordinates wrong?" The child with milky white hair looked around the room and said. "The coordinates are correct. That girl is our contact target," the black-haired boy replied.
She involuntarily sat up in bed.
--They're talking after all!

The boys sitting on the floor all looked at her at once.
"That girl is looking at us!"
One boy was astonished and clung to the red-haired boy next to him.
"Whoa, s-sorry!"

The red-haired boy also flinched back with frightened eyes.
The boys were all poised to flee, keeping their distance from the bed where she was.
She had no idea what was going on.

"You guys--"
The girl finally managed to say just that.
The boys looked at each other's faces. They all hastily stood up and, scrambling, rushed toward the closet.
"We'll come from the entrance next time."
As he left, the red-haired boy, with his hand on the closet door, waved it as if he had an afterthought.

Her heart pounded. Her head spun. She gripped the futon with both hands.

They were leaving. The door shut with a bang. She yelled toward the closet.

"Wait—"

Silence fell in the room. She put her hand to her chest. The closet opened slightly again. Heads peeked out from inside. Frightened and hesitant, yet with unconcealed curiosity, boys with red, white, and black hair poked their faces out.

The door opened slowly.

"Can you hear my words?"

She asked in a trembling voice. The boys slowly nodded and smiled, a little shyly. Her chest and face were hot, and tears almost overflowed.

"I'm happy you came."

The boys introduced themselves by name. The red-haired boy was Rubedo. The white-haired boy was Albedo. The black-haired boy was Nigredo. When she asked, "Are you triplets?" They exchanged knowing smiles.

After that, they talked a little, and she laughed a lot. They promised to come back again and left as quickly as they arrived, like the wind. After they disappeared into the closet, she sat on the bench hanging from the eaves and repeated their names over and over. She rocked the bench until she was tired of it.

The sun was dazzling, and the lawn swayed in the wind. For the first time since coming there, she gave thanks to the sky. For the first time in her life, she knew awe.

They wandered, walked, and saw through the afterimages of distant days. It was a strange feeling, like visiting an underwater world. The afterimages did not notice them. They could feel the breathing of the afterimages, as if they themselves had become the afterimages—

"Is that Momo-chan?" Shion asks.

"It's Sakura," was the reply.

In a slightly miserable exhilaration, like waking from a dream, a man's and a woman's voice could be heard.

"Dimitri, do you really think those boys can help treat Sakura?"

"Your daughter's condition is not just an organic disease. It's related to the U.M.N.'s synchronicity..."
[... in this era a hypersensitivity disease should not exist]
“I think contact with them, U.R.T.V. who have anti-U-DO waves that can control the U.M.N waves to a certain extent, would be beneficial for your daughter's treatment”

《I can't believe the ability to contact U-DO would be useful for this. But what will happen to those children? Even for Sakura's sake, I don't want to make those children suffer》

《Suffer? Compared to the training program they always do, communication therapy with your daughter is like a sabbatical for them》

The boy suddenly opened his eyes in an egg-shaped pod and jumped up. His throat was choked and he coughed. It was the pale room where he always woke up. Around him, many similar pods were lined up and crowded together.

But that day, most of them were empty. Besides the boy, only Albedo and Nigredo were there. They were not awake yet. He could see the operation booth through the glass. Surrounded by many machines, a blond man and a dark brown-haired woman were talking. It was Dr. Dimitri Yuriev and a woman he had never seen before.

While staring at the woman with curiosity, he realized that she resembled someone. She had a strong resemblance to the girl who had been talking until then. The two noticed that the boy was awake and stopped talking. Dr. Yuriev turned on the microphone.

《Over here. She wants to talk for a while》

The boy nodded and went out into the corridor once to enter the adjacent operation room. In the corridor, two standard bodies with the same blond hair as the doctor were walking side by side. They stared at the boy as if looking at something rare.

The boy entered the operation room and looked at the monitors and terminals in the room. He felt uneasy when he came there. This was because researchers in white coats were always staring at them from there. The woman introduced herself as Dr. Yuri Mizrahi.

Her eyes were very gentle, and the boy suddenly thought of his mother whom he had never seen. He was a little ashamed of thinking such a thing and excused himself. He said that this was because he had talked to that child, and that he had asked about that child's mama, and that was why.

The boy looked up at Dr. Yuri and spoke. He remembered a small promise he had made with the girl.

"That child - that girl said. That she loves her mama very much. That she loves her mama always, and to tell you that."

A look of surprise suddenly crossed Dr. Yuri's face. The boy said that much, and then realized that he still had something left to say.

"Oh, she said last year for my birthday, you got her a seashell jewelry box."

"She said tell my mother that, she'll understand…"
Dr. Yuri's head quickly turned red.
Dr. Yuriev, who had been staring at the two, pushed up his glasses and muttered,

"Hmm, their wavelengths matched."
"You can talk to Sakura?!"
The boy nodded, a little flustered by her serious face.
"What's your name?"
"Rubedo! oh, U.R.T.V., individual number 666."

Dr. Yuri squatted in front of the boy, took his hand, and squeezed it tightly. Her serious gaze captured the boy's heart.

"Rubedo, from now on, tell me what she says—please."

"Yes!" he replied vigorously.

Seeing Dr. Yuri's happy face, the boy was also happy. In normal Encephalon training, even if he worked desperately to get good grades, no one smiled with such a beautiful face. He could feel that he had really done something good. Dr. Yuriev expressionlessly gave the boy a light pat on the shoulder.

Since then, the red-haired boy—Rubedo—visited the girl's house many times. "The first time I came, our wavelengths matched the best, so I was asked back by your mom.", Rubedo said, looking a little embarrassed. As they talked, she realized that, contrary to his initial flustered attitude, he was an extraordinary boy by normal standards.

Thanks to her researcher parents, the girl had some knowledge of medicine and thought she understood her own illness to some extent, but Rubedo's explanation was this:

"According to Yuri, the neural network in your brain for recognizing the outside world and expressing the inner self is severed. The control of electrical pulses is unstable. Even if we correct the membrane potential with drug administration or glial assistance from nanomachines according to that diagnosis, it will have no effect. So, we'll raise the efficiency of contact between the outside world and your inner self by flowing my unique wavelength into your brain. Got it?"

The girl thought it was a bit childish to show off all the specifics of the disease to the patient herself, but she was happy that she could tell from his tone that he genuinely wanted to help her.

He said he was an U.R.T.V.; born not from a mother's womb, but through special genetic manipulation—in old terms, a test-tube baby. They were children whose birth and upbringing were thoroughly controlled and designed. Albedo and Nigredo, whom the girl met first, were Rubedo's siblings born within that plan.

And apparently, 669 more of those children had been born! Hearing that, the girl's eyes widened in surprise. She thought they were triplets, but it was 669 siblings.

"Do you all live in one place?" she asked, and Rubedo looked down uncomfortably.

According to his story, more than half of them died before birth or during training. Rubedo's number, <666>, was engraved in red letters on his palm. He said Albedo was <667> and Nigredo was <669>.

"Then what about number 668?" Sakura shrugged at the girl's words.

"A sassy girl, I've only met her once, her name is Citrine."

"There are girls among Rubedo's siblings?"

"Yeah, but the female U.R.T.V. don't seem to be doing well. Even counting her, only nine are left. He seemed very frustrated about that. That's enough already."

That was the end of that story. Rubedo was in a bad mood.

One day, Rubedo and Mom came up with a way for her to increase her contact with the outside world through the piano. They remembered that the piano Mom used as a child was still gathering dust in the house. The girl was excited by the story. She had

always wondered what music was like. Not always, but sometimes the words Mom and Dad spoke to her, the books they read, and the music they let her listen to reached her consciousness.

"Yuri, we brought such a big grand piano into a room in the research building at the Yuriev Institute. It made Dr. Yuriev turned red with anger."

Rubedo laughed, indicating the size of the piano with both hands.

Since then, she challenged herself to play the piano every day. Carefully tracing the unique waves he emitted, she gradually concentrated her consciousness and touched the invisible, untouchable keyboard. With the results of her patient practice, a month later she played "Amazing Grace" perfectly.

Rubedo told her that Mom cried when she heard it.

"It's words that reached us from a world we can't reach," Mom apparently said.

She couldn't hear it, but they said Rubedo also played the harmonica along with the song when she played the piano.

In the distance, faintly, they heard the sound of the piano. Even if they listened intently, they could no longer hear it, and in the deserted white garden, the leaves of the trees rustled. The sound of the fountain hit the round basin. The afterimages of lost children ran across the stone pavement.

The boy sat on the bench and showed off his harmonica to the two of them.

"I've gotten pretty good, you know."

Nigredo peered into the boy's eyes, as if to tease him.

"Hmm, you practice to the piano?"

The swaying tree shadow swayed over Nigredo's face. His cheeks relaxed slightly with a puff.

"If you're that worried about that girl, why don't you stay in the virtual space all the time? I think the girl would be happy too."

The boy's cheeks flushed hot.

"It's not like that!"

Albedo poked his white head out from behind Nigredo's back. His expression was clouded with anxiety.

"Lately, Rubedo's concentration has been dropping. It's strange. Will you be ready when the U-Do Simulator mock exam comes up?" Link Master

"I-I know it is. I'll fulfill my duty as a link start point."

Albedo's purple eyes moistened, and the whites of his eyes became bloodshot and reddish. His face contorted, and his lips trembled.

"We can trust Rubedo, can't we? If we have Rubedo, we don't have to be afraid of U-Do, do we?"

"Of course! Pull yourself together. Even you are a variant with an extraordinary wave as an U.R.T.V."

Rubedo and Nigredo looked at each other with a look of astonishment. Albedo was always like that, somewhat lacking in discipline. He could not do anything by himself without him or Nigredo.

His relationship with the standard bodies was also strange; when he was with Rubedo and Nigredo, he was strong and even cursed at others, but when he was alone, there were many times when he could not even speak. To the majority of standard bodies at the Yuriev Institute, they seemed to give the impression he had unsettling irregularities.

Certainly, there were no standard bodies among them who showed emotions as intensely as they did, and everyone's hair color was the same dull blond. To them, these people called variants were foreign objects that were different from them in appearance and substance.

On the other hand, according to Albedo, the standard bodies were the ones with the same face, same personality, and low ability. It was the same in other respects, too, so essentially they were monsters as the ultimate group of non-individuals.

This situation was a headache for Rubedo, who served as their leader. Originally, the Standard Bodies had weak emotions, and thus less hatred, so if even Albedo softened his attitude, he thought everything would work out.

However, Albedo, who lacked confidence in his own abilities, had a harsh and persistent personality towards those he perceived as weak. If he and the always-calm Nigredo didn't keep him in check, he might cause an incident.

Rubedo knew that Albedo was secretly hiding a handgun. A little while ago, Albedo secretly beckoned Rubedo over and showed him the silver barrel of the gun from his small locker as if showing off a treasure.

"I stole it from the researchers' place. Look, those scumbags, they hate us. I'm not scared, but you never know what they might do."

Receiving Rubedo's chiding gaze, Albedo looked a little tearful and pouted.

"Just in case, you know. If you want it, Rubedo, I'll give it to you."

Of course, Rubedo had not talked about such trivial things with Sakura. She had many more things she wanted to talk about than that. After meeting Sakura, Rubedo's life had changed without him even noticing it.

He began to notice the smell drifting from trees and soil that he had never paid attention to before, and the small sounds made by the wind. He unconsciously searched for such things to find them for Sakura. When he could not find them, he would even add them in his imagination. For this reason, Albedo's pointing out that his concentration was scattered hit a sore spot for Rubedo.

After meeting him, the girl's world changed, and she herself changed along with it. She started carefully combing her hair with a boxwood comb and practiced smiling in the mirror. She wanted him to feel good when he came to visit. In that unchanging world, he arrived with the seasons of the outside world in his hands. He told her many stories about the utmost transitions of the seasons that could be felt within the birdcage that was the Yuriev Institute.

She noticed that Rubedo was sometimes telling lies. He spoke of the scent of jasmine that he had not smelled and conveyed the sound of tiger beetle wings that he had not heard. But that was okay. The boy also noticed that he was being noticed.

Living in a closed living space, the two communicated in their dreams about the world. They created an imitation. Before long, when viewing the scenery of this virtual space, she started thinking about it in correspondence with the outside world. And she started remembering Rubedo, who taught her about that world, as if with every breath. It was a very warm feeling. It was a gentle windbreak that protected the girl from the dark clouds that constantly rushed in from somewhere to catch her.

Now, the afternoon time flowing in this world was also ending, and the setting sun was shining on the horizon. The two of them sat on the swing bench hanging from the

eaves of the white house and watched the sunset. The two were dyed in orange light. The fake lawn, which did not need maintenance, made a pleasant rustling sound.

"——Papa seems to be doing research on treatment too. He's creating Realiens very close to humans, and says they'll constantly interlink with my senses. If that succeeds, I won't make Mama sad anymore."

"Hmm, you have good parents, Sakura's family."

"What about Rubedo? Rubedo's father is Dr. Yuriev, right? Don't you have a mother?"

Rubedo put both arms around his head. The chain that hung the bench squeaked tightly.

"I do. In a genetic sense. A healthy egg with an unblemished chromosome. That's all we know."

Rubedo's face changed to that of a child his age.

"Aren't you looking for her? Don't you want to meet her?"

"What am I supposed to do if I meet her——say 'You are the parent of a genetically engineered biological weapon'?"

Rubedo said this in a hoarse whisper, put both arms on the handrail of the bench, and buried his face in them powerlessly.

Maybe she shouldn't have talked about this, the girl regretted it a little. It was painful to know that this boy who had given her so many worlds held such an unbearable feeling. The girl gently put her hand on his shoulder and felt his body temperature.

There was no way a weapon this soft and moping existed. She wanted to laugh it off like that. Instead, she spoke.

"Don't say it like that. Rubedo is a wonderful boy. Not a weapon."

"I am too. The only time we can go outside the Institute is when a war breaks out."

Rubedo said quickly and then fell silent, staring intently at the shadow stretching under the eaves. The girl looked at his profile and thought, then more than ever, that she and this boy were very similar.

But someday——you will surely get out. Because you are a boy who can realize the image you envision in the outside world. Thinking about such things, she suddenly remembered something she had to talk about then.

"Hey, Rubedo. I have a favor to ask you."

It was a premonition that had recently arisen in her heart.

"It's about 'sister'."

"A sister is about to be born. Not born from a mother, but a slightly different feeling of sister."

To Rubedo, who looked stunned by the sudden turn of events, the girl smiled.

"I want you to protect that sister and Mama—in my place."

Rubedo blinked for a while, not understanding the story well. He cleared his throat, swallowed the meaning with a gulp, and his face, bathed in the setting sun, shone proudly.

"Okay. If she's your sister, I'll take care of her as my sister."

Seeing Rubedo's smile, various emotions welled up in her chest. For some reason, she also felt a little proud and peered into the boy's face.

"It's a promise, okay?"

"Yeah, leave it to me—"

Without letting him say anything, the girl gently put her lips to Rubedo's cheek, which was stained with the color of the setting sun.

"Good night, Rubedo. See you tomorrow."

She said whispering to him, the girl ran into the house. Outside, the chains of the swing made a terrible noise. The days of the cradle, the rocking cradle, were eclipsed.

The boy was in the U.M.N. linkage simulation room he always used when meeting Sakura. But that day, he was not alone. Thankfully, he was with many other standard bodies. Gloomy, taciturn, not a single wasted word. They formed neat rows vertically and horizontally, without a single disorder.

Dr. Yuriev was watching everyone with his usual transcendent gaze. Next to him was the figure of Sakura's mother, Dr. Yuri Mizrahi. Yuri looked a little haggard, with dark circles under her eyes, busy with the preparations for the mission.

Rubedo, Albedo, and Nigredo were lined up in the middle of the line. Rubedo's palms were damp with sweat. He had made up his mind to some extent, but there, his feelings were unsettled. Looking around, the dozens of standard bodies gathered in the room all had the same face, boys with dull blond hair. From then on, he had to command them and form a link.

Next to Rubedo, Albedo whispered.

"I hate those guys."

"Shh."

Nigredo stared at Albedo as if to admonish him.

"But look. They don't have a will of their own, they're all one mass of ego. Why are they like that up to number 665?"

Rubedo shook his head.

"The standard bodies have weak anti-waves—but it's not their fault they were born that way."

"Ugh. No, no." Albedo made an exaggerated shuddering gesture.

Dr. Yuriev's voice was heard through the microphone.

(This is not an exercise. We will dive into the deep consciousness of a sleeping subject via U.M.N. to improve a perceptual disorder. This is a mission with great potential gain, also as training against U-DO.)

Yuri supplemented in a slightly stiff voice.

(The descent target is the sea with a white sandy beach. This sea is a subjective image under a consciousness barrier by the subject. We would like you to remove whatever is lurking in that image that is inhibiting neurotransmission.)

"The sea!" Rubedo forgot all his hesitations and involuntarily raised his voice.

"I've never seen the sea!" Albedo shouted excitedly.

"That's right—someday, let's go," Nigredo said gently.

Suddenly, a tense, low-wavelength malice cut into the thoughts that had begun to loosen by imagining the sea. Rubedo looked back at the standard body behind him, startled. He was staring at Rubedo without expression. All the standard bodies were looking at Rubedo all at once. Weak mental waves combined, repeatedly ebbing and flowing.

The standard bodies were originally emotionally sparse; inhibited hatred and contempt waves flowed in.

(Why—. Why are you the leader? Despite being a variant. Despite being a monster.)

Rubedo was disturbed and looked at Dr. Yuriev and Yuri, who were continuing their conversation in low voices. They seemed not to have noticed. Albedo's face turned pale as he caught the telepathic voice.

"Shut up—you pieces of trash," he wet his lips with foam.

"Don't make fun of Rubedo. Your power is on a completely different level!" Nigredo held down Albedo's shoulder, which was trembling slightly with anger.

Rubedo's heart was stirring—this was inside Sakura's heart. The idyllic detached house where he met her was of course a part of it, but the forest was closer to its core. He certainly felt as if he could feel Sakura's breath in every corner of the space. Her symbols seemed to be hidden everywhere in the undergrowth and trees, the shining wind, and the soil. It was somewhat similar to the season he himself had searched for within the Institute for Sakura.

The sun shone brightly. Standard bodies formed neat ranks and advanced. With the same gestures, kicking the soil, crushing new shoots, breaking branches, they marched. Despite the heat, there was no sign of sluggishness anywhere.

He felt suffocated, as if stepping with muddy boots into the world of communication that he and Sakura had built. He suppressed his irritation. He convinced himself that this was a mission being carried out for Sakura. If this went well, and she could return to the outside world, he could go to a real ocean with her, and with the "sister" she had talked about at that time.

"—But the standard bodies are mad at Rubedo. Those guys are putting up a challenge despite being failures..."

"It's okay as long as we firmly trust Rubedo. If the chain is completed, the mission won't be hindered."

Rubedo glanced sideways at his two companions. Recently, he felt their appearance had changed somewhat from before. No, rather, it was he who had changed. While touching Sakura, he had become unable to interact with them as before.

Until then, there was nothing to fear. But then, he was afraid of dying. And most of all, he was afraid of losing his heart.

Rubedo looked at the standard bodies again, and felt this self was surely connected to the end of their existence. He stared at the red mark on his palm as if glaring at it. URTV. Number <666>. His existence stood at the end of the sacrifice of six hundred and sixty-five will-less peers connected to him. It was not something as gentle as "the precious sacrifices that made the current me." It was the result of a mountain of experimental materials' deaths that shaped the aggressiveness nesting in Rubedo's spirit.

If there were any, towards the Sakura symbols hidden in the bright forest, Rubedo cast a meaningless gaze seeking salvation. A stream filled with light, the green of the trees swayed. The prayer disappeared without receiving an answer.
A Midsummer forest. The summer world Rubedo conveyed to her. More than thirty of Dimitri Yuriev's children, neither refusing nor welcoming, just swayed in that fictional rustle.

Gradually, the trees became fewer, and suddenly the scenery opened up.
The columns of standard-bodies stopped all at once.
Windmills on a hill. A small white sand path was laid out on the hill, curving gently near the windmills.

The path continued beyond the hill. The other side was blocked from view by the hill. The sound of waves could be heard on the wind. The sea was near. It was probably just beyond this hill.

The standard-bodies reformed their ranks and resumed their advance. They proceeded in three columns on the white path like a line of ants.
Rubedo noticed the dark clouds that had somehow appeared in the sky ahead.
The swirling dark clouds gradually approached from the distant sky.

The Encephalon space vibrated repeatedly, and he felt a tingling sensation on his skin. Something ominous was slowly trying to surround them. Rubedo immediately concentrated his consciousness to send a warning to the column.
"Danger! Behind you!"

Suddenly, he was pushed by Nigredo.
Rubedo stumbled, took a step back, and looked around.
A formless black substance was writhing in the spot where he had been a few moments ago. When Nigredo swung his arm and hit it with a ball of energy, it blinked sadly and disappeared without a trace.

Rubedo quickly turned his head and checked his surroundings. Innumerable black things had suddenly appeared. They moved awkwardly, trying to catch Rubedo and the others.

"What is this? They're persistent!"
Albedo showed his irritation and mowed down the substances one after another.
After chasing away most of the strange substances that had approached them, Rubedo looked up at the sky and observed the dark clouds. They were definitely bigger than before. When he looked at them again like this, they looked less like clouds and more like a strange liquid stain eroding the sky.

Rubedo bit his trembling lip and put an unspeakably bad feeling deep in his mind.
The leader could not be shaken.
"Ready to beat them Standard-bodies? Let's use mental chaining and strike them all at once!"

He closed his eyes, concentrated his consciousness, adjusted his wavelength, and waited for the wave to come. Suddenly, a tense thought of terror flowed into his brain.
< The wave is coming--. The wave is coming >
"Hey, what are you talking about---"
"Rubedo, look!" Rubedo opened his eyes wide at Nigredo's cry.

Nigredo's trembling fingertip pointed to the path leading to the hill.
The U.R.T.V, and standard-bodies that had been neatly lined up were now scattered and looking up at the sky.
Their expressions were twisted in a terrifying fear, even from a distance.
Rubedo had never before witnessed such emotion from the standard bodies.

"Noooo!" "Waaaaah!" They began screaming in agony and writhing on the ground. A deep purple substance welled up from all over the small bodies of the standard bodies. Like ink stains dropped on a white road, their outlines melted and then lost their properties as solids.
Albedo grabbed Rubedo's right sleeve with a trembling hand.

"Are they contaminated? Even though we're not inside the U-Do Simulator!"
The forms of the standard bodies changed one after another. Their arms became unusually long, their heads slender, and their legs twisted like grasshoppers. They were monsters that didn't resemble humans at all. Some left the road and fled to the hill, while others tried to escape into the forest.

It was too late to link now. Moreover, the fear that had mixed into his head earlier still left a strange aftertaste in his heart. He didn't want to feel that again. A feeling like black liquid sloshing inside his skull.
Nigredo pulled Rubedo's left sleeve.

"What do we do, Rubedo?"
"Wh-what do you mean we do—" Rubedo looked at the two people on his left and right in confusion, then looked up at the sky.
Aren't the doctors watching this in the operation room? Why don't they emergency stop the Encepheron Dive? Can't they see? Is it because of the black substance covering that sky? I don't want to die. I don't want to become like that.

The monsters swiveled their heads around, found the three who had not transformed yet, and tilted their heads. Their sharp, bird-like cries echoed around them.
Then, all at once, they came scurrying toward them.
Rubedo screamed.

"Let's run! Run into the forest!"
"We won't make it, Rubedo. We have to fight them."
Nigredo shook her head and closed her eyes. She was concentrating her consciousness and raising her power.

Rubedo swallowed and stared at the monsters closing in.
—Fight that? But that is.
Albedo let out a high-pitched roar and braced herself.
There were six contaminated bodies coming toward them.

Nigredo and Albedo sprang out almost simultaneously.
In response, the contaminated bodies also leaped into the air and swung the sharp claws that had grown on their hands toward the two.

Energy waves were released from the hands of the two, collided with the contaminated bodies, and scattered light in the air. The contaminated bodies that fell to the ground immediately bounced up and pounced on the two as black flashes of light.

Nigredo twisted his body, rolled onto the ground, and somehow managed to avoid it. Raising half his body, twisting one hand in the air, the contaminated body that tried to attack burst from the inside.

Albedo let out a growl and swung an energy wave sharpened like a blade sideways. The bisected contaminated body scattered black material stuffed inside its body and let out a piercing scream.

"You guys—"
One of the contaminated bodies attacked Rubedo as he was about to speak.
An arm with claws closed in. Rubedo hurriedly twisted his body to try and find it, but it was too late.

A burning pain ran through his chest, and Rubedo groaned in agony. Something warm soaked his clothes. Torn cloth hung from his chest.
Injuries in the Encephalon world acted on the brain and surely left some effect on the living cells. Intense pain burned his nerves.

The contaminated body landed on the ground, bent its knees, and leaped towards Rubedo again.
Rubedo grabbed its arms, pressed his own forehead against the contaminated body's forehead, and roared.

He sent a powerful mental wave directly into the opponent.
The contaminated body screamed and rolled onto the ground.
Rubedo checked his surroundings while regulating his rough breathing.

It seemed all the other contaminated bodies had been wiped out by Nigredo and Albedo, and none were moving anymore. The black, stain-like substance that had invaded the sky was also gone somewhere.

He forced his hazy consciousness to walk the white road leading to the hill.
His legs trembled, and his cut chest hurt, but he climbed it single-mindedly.
From the cliff on top of the hill, he could see the sea and the beach. His heart did not pound at the first sight of the sea.

Rubedo mentally linked and gathered Nigredo, Albedo, and the surviving, scattered standard bodies on top of the hill.

If they stayed there, it would be easier for the operation room to track them.
They had reached this point, but it was clear that continuing treatment any further was impossible in this state. If something like that happened again, annihilation would be unavoidable.

The order to abort the mission still had not come. Something must have happened on their end too. However, for now, they had no choice but to wait for contact.
While looking at the waves washing in and out of the distant sea, Albedo's angry voice entered his ears.

"I told you not to lay a hand on Rubedo. It's not that we mutants are weird. You guys are just useless!" Albedo was excited and kicked the side of a fallen standard body.
He then straddled the standard body, which remained fallen and unresisting, and pounded it with his fists. The standard body's neck shook violently from side to side with each blow, as if its bones were breaking.
Blood splattered on Albedo's face. Albedo's breathing became ragged.

"Stop it. Are you trying to kill him?" Rubedo grabbed Albedo's arm.
"Rubedo—" Albedo looked up at his face. That face twitched two or three times.
"Why are you looking at me like that, Rubedo?"
For a while, gloomy days continued for Rubedo.

After the rescue from Encepheron, in the infirmary, Yuri said to Rubedo:
—It's not your fault that we failed, and it's not the end of everything. For now, think about healing your body and mind first. Sakura is probably waiting for the healthy Rubedo, too.

A strong look of impatience was on Yuri's face.
It was probably she who needed comfort more.
Yuri frankly apologized for the delay in rescue. The Encepheron space suddenly became insulated and could not be restored for a while.

The cause, including the transformation of the standard bodies, was unknown. Sakura's treatment was postponed indefinitely. Rubedo, injured both physically and mentally, was hospitalized in the infirmary to receive nano-treatment. In the intensive care unit next door, standard body 623, whom Albedo had beaten up, was in a coma.

Nigredo came to visit every day, but Albedo did not. Nigredo placed a chair by Rubedo's pillow and sat thinking quietly without doing anything. In the empty hospital bed, Rubedo also thought about various things aimlessly.

—Why is something like that living inside Sakura's heart?
—What exactly is that black thing?
—What is happening to Sakura now, and what will happen to her in the future?

He was discharged, but was told that contact with Sakura was prohibited for a while when he left the hospital room. That was fine with him. He was feeling very dark right then and did not have the confidence to talk to her well even if he met her. He did not feel like being comforted like before. It was his turn to cheer her up.

When he left the infirmary, he looked for Albedo, who had been on his mind throughout his hospital stay. That lonely person not coming to visit must have meant he was quite hurt. He felt bad about what he did to Albedo.

What the enraged Albedo did to standard body 623 was certainly not a good thing. 623 did not attack Rubedo and the others, and above all, those who transformed did not have any fault either. If anyone was to be blamed, it should first have been himself, the leader, for his lax crisis judgment. Still, at that moment, Albedo got angry for his sake. He scolded him without listening.As a result, Albedo really became isolated.

Anyway, Albedo was unstable. They could not leave him alone. Above all, they were originally one creature. The fresh air outside after a long time was refreshing.
Rubedo let out a sigh mixed with regret and trouble, and looked up at the trunk of a tree. The hospitalization was for about a week, but during that time summer had passed and autumn had arrived.

The evergreen trees in the Institute never dropped their leaves, but even so, their leaves subtly changed their hue from the lush green of summer to a slightly withered color.
The soil of the lawn smelled ripe.
Various lives were gradually beginning to slide down from their peak.
"Rubedo"

When he looked back, Nigredo was standing there.
"I found Albedo. He's in the back."
Nigredo pointed behind him with his thumb.
Rubedo nodded, and they went to the back together.

Behind the main building of the Institute was a small backyard surrounded by a brick wall. Due to the exposed soil and overgrown trees, there was a dim, lush atmosphere even during the daytime.
It was the only place in this facility where they could observe real nature, and if they were lucky, they could also find insects.

When Rubedo and the others were younger, they often played there.
Albedo was not in this backyard. He was standing stunned beside the inscription right outside the backyard. Rubedo and the others approached silently and stared at Albedo.
While wondering how to call out to him, the white-haired boy opened his mouth first.
His tone irritated him.

"What is it?"
"What were you thinking? Number 623 is seriously injured."
Albedo, who looked back, had a strangely bright smile.
"What? That's nothing."Nigredo folded his arms in an amazed manner.

"It's not nothing, is it? If the standard bodies start to distrust us, it will be difficult for Rubedo to work."
"No need to worry. If they get injured like that, they just need to regenerate immediately." Albedo smiled innocently.
"Regenerate? What are you talking about..."
"What do you mean, like this." Albedo's smile spread into a crescent shape.

He casually put a small handgun, which he had taken out of his pocket at some point, to his own temple. He pulled the trigger. Like a balloon popping, most of Albedo's head was blown off. Blood and brain matter splattered.

"Uwaaaaaah!" Rubedo and Nigredo screamed, stumbled backward, and fell on their backs. Rubedo looked up in astonishment at the headless torso.
Albedo's head, which should have burst, was back to normal.

"See?" Albedo laughed innocently.
"Idiot." Getting up, they ran over to Albedo and frantically slapped his head.
---Damn it. What a thing to show me. I totally thought you had died.

"Don't ever do that again. If you die, if you die you won't come back to life again!" Rubedo's voice trembled.

Albedo's face showed confusion. He shook his head as if not understanding what was said, then suddenly realized and looked at both their faces alternately.

"That can't be—" he asked hesitantly. "Rubedo and the others don't regenerate?"
"Of course they don't," Rubedo spat, looking away.
"That's a special ability only you have," Nigredo added softly.
Albedo's eyes widened. The handgun slipped from his hand. He touched his cheeks with both hands.

"Only me—" Albedo's face was frozen in confusion and fear.
"Are you both going to die and leave me behind?"
Rubedo realized with a shudder. Albedo hadn't failed to visit; he simply hadn't been able to comprehend that Rubedo was in the hospital with an injury.Albedo sniffled and began to cry. "Rubedo, don't leave me behind!" Albedo clung to Rubedo's chest, wailing. He continued to cry indefinitely.

They gathered in the backyard of the Yuriev Institute. A white-haired boy was digging in the soil at the base of the largest tree.

"What is he doing?" Shion asked. "I don't know," Jin shook his head. "But from that day, the day he learned he couldn't die, Albedo changed somehow."Albedo's afterimage continued to dig single-mindedly. Standard bodies surrounded him with vacant expressions, observing the scene.

"We didn't understand," the white-haired boy moved his mouth, speaking something in an inaudible sound. "What it feels like to have a body that cannot die. We couldn't possibly know."

"Death is the soul's rest. Who said that, I wonder. If the body doesn't die, and only the fear borne by the spirit accumulates, the world is nothing more than an eternal prison," Ziggy said.

For an instant, a flicker of emotion crossed KOS-MOS's eyes and vanished.
"Albedo and I were originally one," Jin stared at the boy digging in the soil.
"Because you had the same original fertilized egg?" Shion asked.
"No. Literally, we were joined at the back until twenty-eight weeks after fertilization[12]. His heart was around here."

"Eh?"

"Rarely, due to incomplete division, there exist twins who share part of their organs," KOS-MOS announced.

[12] This is clearly an adam and eve androgyny reference.

"That's right. Basically, the special abilities of me and him are based on the same principle, whether stopping or promoting cell regeneration. Due to being separated into non-aging and immortality, the direction went to opposite poles. That's why I shouldn't have abandoned him."

"Tomaru. Can't you reach out to that person one more time?"

"Both he and I are stubborn, you know." He lowered his gaze. Albedo continued to dig up the soil while muttering something to himself. He never stopped. Because it was a grave for his brothers.

Momo stood still with an empty look. He was unresponsive to most stimuli and saw nothing. Albedo's lonely back digging the soil was reflected on the glass-like surface of his eyes.

His memory was not clear. The scene was so vague that the boy sometimes wondered if it was a dream later on. It seemed like a fictional image created to seal away the memory of losing Sakura, unable to feel the reality of it.

At that time, Rubedo was in a good mood for the first time in a while. Beside him was the figure of that very important girl to him. Sakura's treatment resumed. That time, only the familiar Rubedo and Sakura headed to the sea.

It was a suggestion from Dr. Yuriev that it was important for Sakura herself to recognize the subject she needed to overcome first. During the week of preparation, Rubedo kept thinking about what to talk about with the girl he hadn't seen in a long time. The forest inside Encephalon was in deep winter and covered with snow. It was terribly cold, but still, Rubedo's heart was uplifted.

They walked, their teeth chattering, laughing and stepping on the snow. As they did so, their bodies gradually warmed up and they stopped caring about the cold. Rubedo and Sakura walked noisily through the beautiful forest filled with frost-covered trees, undergrowth, withered trees that looked as if they were powdered, and quiet songs. Sakura pointed at Rubedo, who had slipped, fallen, and turned all white while trying to cross a frozen stream, and laughed.

Sakura's dark brown hair turned pure white when the sullen Rubedo threw a snowball at her. Thinking back later, the two of them were a little too excited at that time. Perhaps they were feigning excitement to hide their anxiety.

When they exited the forest, they saw the windmill they had seen sometime before. That feeling of fear slightly revived in Rubedo's chest. However, that day, the ominous dark clouds were not visible on the hill. The wind blew, and the smell of the tide was in the white world.

It smelled. Rubedo shouted in excitement. "Sakura. No one is here today. If we run, we'll be at the sea in no time."

He took Sakura's hand, kicked the snow, and ran frantically towards the hill. However, when they reached the top of the hill overlooking the sea, their joined hands separated. Sakura stopped in her tracks.

"Why? Let's go. Let's cure your illness and go to the real sea with me." Rubedo looked back impatiently, a puzzled look on his face. On Sakura's face was an expression Rubedo had never seen before—an expression of terror.

Rubedo followed Sakura's gaze and looked down at his own feet. A shadow growing from his feet was writhing violently, unrelated to his movements. The original shape was not exactly clear, but it didn't look human at all.

"Rubedo—that—"

Sakura's voice trembled. Sakura backed away. Instead, the writhing shadow beckoned Rubedo as if adoring him.

(What is it? Rubedo too, isn't Rubedo also one of us? Wasn't Rubedo also a monster? That's right. You were originally one with me. If I'm a monster, then Rubedo must be a monster too! I'm so happy. I'm so happy!)

"No, this isn't my shadow!" Rubedo shook his head and shouted. "Rubedo, don't be angry. Calm down, please," Sakura screamed.

Rubedo swung his arm around to shoo away the shadow. The boy shouted angrily at something. The boundary between memory and reality became blurred.

"I am not a monster!"

And then, the boy suddenly became Jr.; A voice was heard in his head.

(Do you still feel the heartbeat in your right chest? The heartbeat of my heart that was buried in your right back.)

Sho looked around frantically. —Where was this? He grabbed his right chest and groaned.

"This is a trap, Rubedo," Sakura shouted somewhere.

—Who was he?

"This is a trap, Jr.!" Momo was shouting somewhere.

However, it did not reach Jr.'s heart. His body was automatically reacting to the presence of U-Do filling the air. An electric current was running through his nerves at a dizzying speed, and Jr.'s body was transitioning to a combat state.

(Emergency situation, Red Dragon MODE. You look cute, Rubedo. Do you feel the U-Do? It's the aftermath of that thing I specially whipped up for you.)

Albedo laughed from afar. Jr. spread his hands and roared fiercely towards the distance. His vision was burning crimson. An absolute destructive impulse burned the boundaries of self and other, raging to destroy everything in this world.

He realized that he had likely fallen into a trap at some point. Both the enemy who lured him into the elaborate trap and himself, who was falling for it and losing his mind, were objects of intense hatred. His memory was confused, and he could no longer accurately recognize which days he was in.

Was he Rubedo? Was he Jr.? Did he come to cure Sakura's illness? Did he come to restore Momo's consciousness?

Destroy everything———a heated roar burned his throat. As if the hands of those who died were thrusting out from the sea’s surface, he could barely hear his companions calling out in the turbid torrent of his chaotic consciousness.

"Chief, the Encephalon field structure is beginning a rapid collapse. It's not a system anomaly; it's possible a trap still remains on Momo's side—"

"As I thought, something was still set up. That man, Albedo, even foresaw the possibility of us diving into the Encephalon!?"

"If that man was also an acquaintance of Sakura Mizrahi, he might have anticipated Jr's rampage starting here. Was letting Jr. into the Encephalon part of the plan?!"

"Bypass intrusion into the Encephalon————————!!!"

The beast's roar gushing from Jr.'s throat suddenly quieted. He looked around. Sakura's figure had disappeared. Only he and his companions were left standing on the hill they reached at the end of a long memory. The waves in the gray sea visible in the distance had stopped moving. It was a world of silence like a vacuum with no sea breeze.

Cracks appeared all over the sky of the virtual world. The sky's weather changed rapidly from clear skies to a gray sky. A single snowflake fell.

A rift ran through the space. The wet darkness of inner organs could be glimpsed in its depths. Pushing through the space, one man appeared. He had shaggy white hair and purple eyes filled with madness.

Albedo glanced expressionlessly at Momo. Ziggy stood between them, shielding Momo. Albedo smiled and muttered.

"I will stick your tongue to your upper palate. That way you will be unable to speak and will restrain them. They are a rebellious people."

He looked down and chuckled.

"Pitiful Pêche, a sacrificial doll swinging in the trees. For you, only that moment of killing your heart is the only time you can rest."

Then, he looked up and approached the top casually. The top grabbed his chest and regulated his breathing. Now, if he moved even one step, the stopper in his heart seemed likely to come off. If that happened, he would return to being just a weapon. He had to condense the exploding imagination with his remaining rationality and escape this trap of Albedo's.

Where on earth had he stepped on a landmine? What went wrong? As he traced those days, he wondered if he was unconsciously expecting a different ending, a beautiful end roll where he stood on a sparkling sandy beach with Sakura, Momo, Nigredo, and Albedo.

Albedo leisurely ruffled the top's hair, twitched his nose, and floated a sneer. "Smells good, Rubedo. The smell of anger running through your whole body and vaporizing. Isn't it excessive noradrenaline? Hmm?"

Fierce anger boiled in the top's guts. He gnashed his teeth in humiliation and hatred. A red thought wave burst from his body.

"Bastard!" Ziggy shouted.

"Jr., calm down. It's sad to be on bad terms with your brother, isn't it?"

"On bad terms?"Albedo received Shion's words and laughed loudly.

"Even so, Rubedo and I are very close, young lady."

A warm hand was placed flat on Jr's back. The impact tore his body apart. Jr. stared blankly at Albedo's arm that had pierced his back and thrust out from his right chest. The palm opened and closed like a flower blooming there.

"See? This way, we're always together. Look, day and night mating, like the Dioscuri's twin horses, never apart for a moment—"

"Uwaaaaaah Albedooooo" With a tremendous pain, Rubedo arched, writhed, and rampaged.

"That's right. That's the spirit. You have something stored up that makes you have a wet dream, don't you? Spill it out here. This is inside the mind of the girl you love so much."

"I'll blow you away when I capture you alive." Jr. said in a hoarse small voice. His voice caught in his throat from anger.

Albedo brought his mouth close to the Rubedo's ear and whispered.

"But think carefully."

Jr.'s vision suddenly narrowed sharply. When he came to his senses, he had drawn two pistols from their holsters. He twisted his body, pressed it against Albedo's right shoulder, and pulled the trigger. The attack image burst. With a dull sound, Albedo's right arm disappeared from his shoulder. The hand that had grown from the Rubedo's chest simultaneously fell to the ground.

Jr. quickly whirled around and fired both pistols at once. The left arm and head were blown off and disappeared. The remaining torso staggered backward. After walking a few steps, both arms grew back and the head regenerated.Albedo twisted his body and squeezed out a laugh.

"Indeed, the body is a birdcage for the soul. The cycle of cause and effect repeats every time you die, but the real body doesn't have as much space as the circle at a wizard's feet. But at the same time, this skull is the same size as God himself. Did you see the flesh scatter and the bones turn into white spray? Admit it, it must have felt good, didn't it? Because killing a person is a miraculous moment that is also the killing of the one true God. Expose your passion and pain, and expose those red guts to this world!"

Jr. approached Albedo with a low growl. Jr.'s gun fired. Albedo's side disappeared, and then his chest exploded. His head and both arms fell to the ground with a sound. Albedo's head continued to laugh loudly.

Looking down at his white hair, Jr. fired a shot. The head evaporated.

Albedo walked leisurely to Rubedo's side and whispered. Rubedo's staggering lower body was now fully formed.

"What's wrong? You little pistol-maniacal pedophile. Tired of counting down the days until your execution? Too bad."

Albedo made a sound with his twisted lips.

"The days of atonement never end. Hey, can I ask you a question? Do you think that girl would have died anyway, even if you hadn't been pestering her?"

A crimson wave burst from Rubedo's entire body and burned fiercely. Albedo smiled thinly. A purple wave emanated from his body. The two colors of light intertwined and soared high into the sky. The Encephalon space creaked and its surface began to peel off. The turbulence warped the Encephalon space itself. And the blinding powder snow danced wildly in the atmospheric disturbance. Ziggy held Shion back with his right hand as she involuntarily tried to jump forward.

"Wait, it's dangerous, Shion. Rubedo can't control his power!"
Albedo glanced at them and laughed."Ah, praise him. Rubedo is suppressing his emotions enough. But this can't be stopped by mere willpower. Our bodies crave battle. After all, we are weapons."

Rubedo spread his arms, arched his back, and let out a fierce roar toward the heavens. Shion shuddered at the powder snow touching her cheek. The snow had a body temperature-like warmth. The laws of space were completely breaking down. Shion could not stand the wind pressure and staggered on the vibrating ground. KOS-MOS stood in front of Shion to protect her from the storm.

<Shion, warning. The U.M.N. structures that compose the Encephalon space are shifting hypothetically beyond the variable threshold. If the high-energy collision of the same magnitude continues, this Encephalon space will completely collapse in approximately sixty-five seconds.>

The fraternal struggle unfolding before their eyes was still intensifying. Albedo raised one arm and emitted a purple light to counter Rubedo's flame-colored wave. The two waves, imagined in crimson and purple, devoured each other, embracing and scattering sparks and lightning into the air.

"I've never heard of an energy collision that rips the Encephalon apart from the inside out."

Shion turned pale. If this place was destroyed, everyone there wouldn’t be safe. Chaos spoke from behind them.

"Those two are constantly rewriting the spatial properties with the U.M.N. interference ability they possess. The Encephalon space can no longer withstand the distortion."

Shion looked back and screamed."What am I supposed to do?"

"At this rate, no one can stop it. I think it's because the owner of the memory that should be the matrix of this Encephalon is unconscious.The U.M.N.’s structure is resisting the deformation..."

"Momo is doing this?"

Shion looked at the expressionless Momo. Momo's face, illuminated by two colors of light, was as expressionless as a doll. Shion couldn't bear to look away from Momo's face, which bore no resemblance to her innocent self.

"Anyway, we have to think about how to escape now. Allen!" Shion's voice was absorbed in vain by the lead-colored sky. Only the howl of the wind could be heard.

"Hey, Allen! Can't you hear me!"

Ziggy put both hands on the motionless Momo's shoulders and shook his head."He's a man who left such a thorough trap. We might have jumped right into the trap he prepared!"

<———Shion, 30 seconds left>

"I, I know. Don't make me nervous, KOS-MOS!"

Shion looked around, but could see nothing due to the storm. In the swirling red and purple, she seemed to see children in the light blue uniforms of the U-FILM Institute running, and she shuddered. The images of memories she had seen so far were disturbed, mixed together, and changed into a grotesque, colorful scene. It appeared for a moment, then unraveled and disappeared like powder snow. The hill overlooking the sea where they should have been no longer retained its original form. The terrain was twisted, the sky was wavy, and the horizon was burning crimson.

Shion was impatient and fumbled at her ears. She should have had her goggles right there if she reached out. Her living body couldn't even move a single finger. She felt like she understood a little of the pain of the girl named Sakura she saw inside the Encephalon. At that moment, a broken voice was heard near her ear.

<——— can't hear! What's happening———>

"Allen!! What's wrong with you!!——Just stop this quickly!"

<———10 seconds left>

KOS-MOS announced coldly. Shion stared at the red sea in despair.

<——Rubedo, Rubedo!>

"Dr. Mizrahi!!"

Ziggy looked up at the sky with his hands still on Momo's shoulders.

<——bedo's aim is probably Momo——data is——>

From somewhere——a faint voice saying, "Stop," was heard. Shion turned toward the voice and nearly screamed. Momo's eyes had regained focus.

"You're awake! Momo-chan!" Her eyes clearly found Albedo with a determined will.

"Stop it---" she yelled at the two men who continued to fight.

Pushing away Ziggy's hands on her shoulders, Momo began to walk toward the two. As she took hesitant steps, a soft light overflowed from Momo's body. Order was gradually returning to the collapsing Encephalon space. The color of the crimson sea softened, and a vibrant pink light filled the world. A tense, hair-raising sensation ran through the internal space, and the Encephalon space, the U.M.N. began to regenerate a complex network internally.

The disturbed space-time was rapidly regaining its self-identity. The original Sakura---Momo's mental structure. The wind calmed the storm and softly caressed their cheeks. The sea changed from crimson to deep blue. Albedo, with an expression of joy, opened his bright red mouth wide and spread his arms.

"You finally spoke, silent Peshe."

That was the signal for the light filling the world to begin writhing. The light converged and rushed up into the sky. Shion and the others looked up at the sky in astonishment. A giant oval hole had opened in the sky of the Encephalon space. Momo's expression turned to surprise and confusion, then to terror. She looked up at the vast bundle of data being instantly sucked into the hungry void, beyond the U.M.N. The light was overflowing with countless symbols. After watching the bundle of data completely

disappear into the oval hole, Albedo looked at Momo with emotionless eyes, as if suddenly having lost interest.

"Peshe, you are truly pure and easy to handle. Mizrahi is an eccentric man. It would have been far safer not to give her a heart resembling a human's. No, but maybe she just seems that way and isn't actually like a human at all? Is she just mimicking the ideally innocent emotions of a human? After all, you are a pathetic chimera that should be called an angel."

Albedo laughed loudly. Behind him, the space twitched again. Albedo disappeared abruptly into the void without even a glance at Shion and the others. The remaining group stood still for a while. No one could speak a word. Everything seemed to happen in an instant, and they couldn't understand what had happened. The sea regained its waves, and a gentle sea breeze began to blow. The plants swayed gently.

"What in the world happened?"

Shion muttered to herself.

<From the status of the log remaining in the Encephalon record, it is presumed that the linked information aggregate that existed in the lower part of MOMO.'s consciousness structure was transferred to the U.M.N.>.

KOS-MOS answered. Ziggy supported Momo's body, which was about to collapse onto the ground.

"Albedo knew that Momo would spontaneously regain consciousness. That man could have destroyed all of us here. But that wasn't his goal. From the beginning, he was only after Momo's data."

Shion nodded. There was probably some trick set up on the Encephalon data. To heighten the spirit of the hill, and to stop the conflict that arose between the two, Momo integrated her self-imposed closed consciousness. Everything went according to Albedo's plan. Shion bit her lip and suddenly felt all the strength leave her body. Ziggy looked down at Momo sleeping in his arms and wiped away the trace of tears that appeared on her face.

"But if that man hadn't appeared, Momo probably would have protected the key until the end and never spontaneously reintegrated her consciousness. Looking only at the result, one could say Momo was saved by Albedo."

Momo, with her eyes closed, had a terribly sad expression. The data she risked her life to protect had been easily stolen. And that was the result of people who cared about Momo trying to help her consciousness return. There was no answer as to which was right. Shion looked up at the sky where Chaos was being held up. If that girl, if Sakura, were there, what would she say? She wanted to hear that.

Shion thought of the promise the boy and girl made at sunset. The phantom boy and girl were etched in her memory with a clear impression. What kind of fate did that girl, the one named Sakura with the boy, follow after that? It was an illusion peculiar to the special technology called Encephalon that reproduced the depths of a person's mind and intruded into it.

A feeling as if others' lives and one's own life were mixed together in a jumble. The boundaries between existences that should not be compatible became unclear for a while. The past never disappeared from the mind. Memory was etched in each perceptual area of the brain, and rather than just storage, it became the circuit itself that continued to drive for current situation recognition.

Shion suddenly felt a tightening anxiety welling up and put her hand on her chest, letting out a deep sigh. She felt as if something was staring intently at them from the depths of Momo's mind, which constructed this Encephalon space. The goggles worn on her bare body vibrated, stimulating her skull minutely. It was a signal from Allen in the operation booth. Shion felt a sense of having her feet on the ground for the first time in a while and let out a sigh of relief.

<Chief, the Encephalon structure has been reconstructed. Momo seems to be awake, and what on earth is going on?>

"The situation is complicated and hard to explain simply. For now, the goal is - achieved. Now make it so we can leave this Encephalon space."

"Understood. There will be a slight shock upon withdrawal, so everyone, please be careful."

Shion suddenly remembered and turned back to KOS-MOS. "KOS-MOS, we part ways again. Do your best in the Second Bureau, too."

"Thank you. You too, Shion, take care." KOS-MOS replied expressionlessly, and her figure suddenly vanished from the Encephalon space. The sound of something snapping rang in her head, and Shion rapidly awoke to the real world. After taking off her goggles, she was momentarily confused about the situation, blinking her eyes a few times. The afterimage of KOS-MOS's blue hair from just before they parted still lingered

in her vision, blending with the color of the distant sea. Shaking her head two or three times to come to her senses, she found herself standing in front of a familiar analysis bed.

Her companions, who had exited the Encephalon space one after another, took off their goggles. Momo faintly opened her eyes. A faint blush colored her cheeks. On the floor in front of her, Yuri was embracing Momo's small body, which she had lowered from the bed.

"Momo-chan, you're awake!"

Shion cried out without thinking, then noticed Yuri's stern profile.

"After all, the Y-data..."

Shion asked tentatively. Yuri looked down for a moment, then gasped.

"It leaked. The key we feared most for these past fourteen years..."

She looked up and met Shion's eyes.

"The situation is in motion. Now, it won't stop."

Rubedo threw his goggles onto the floor, glared into space, and fell silent after that.

In the cockpit of the E.S. Simeon, embraced by darkness, Albedo was in ecstasy alone. The universe of stars and darkness and his own body flipped inside out like a Klein bottle, and now he felt as though he held a nebula within his own body.

The web of existence within his body unraveled, becoming shining particles that quietly boiled. He had finally obtained what he had longed for. The data he acquired through great effort turned out to be only a part of the Y-data. However, Albedo was not interested in anything more than that. It was enough if he found a way to approach U-DO. He would mix this key data with the wave interference ability he had as an U.R.T.V.

With this alone, a corridor leading to the old Miltia, surrounded by a double black hole, would open. He would repair the U.M.N. column and reach the original Zohar where U-DO was. Albedo noticed a cool sound, like bubbles popping in his body. Half-closing his eyes, he listened to the sound and slowly swung his head in time with it.

"Awaken the key to the abyss, Miltia," Albedo sang.

He raised one arm in high spirits, and it turned into particles of light before his eyes, spilling onto his lap. There was none of the intense pain he usually felt when losing organs. There was a pleasure of his vast universe further diffusing and expanding. Albedo's ecstatic face, torso, and legs all changed into particles of light and vanished.

The E.S. Simeon he was piloting also turned into mere particles of light wandering the universe, flowing out into the endless jet-black sea, aiming for the land of Miltia lurking in the depths of the abyss. The river of light particles that was once Albedo diffused thinly and widely, turning into a pulse, and vanished as if seeping into space. He was now nothing more than a torrent of information without a name. The information body caught the weak wave of U.M.N. drifting in virtual space and formed a column leading to Old Miltia. The thoughts faintly remaining in the information body swayed with joy (—the gate that forever connects good and evil was such a thin path. But let's share, the heartbeat of another me, my brother.)

A week of standard calendar time had passed since the astonishing news that the corridor to Old Miltia had opened caused a stir throughout the star cluster. A man walked alone through the lobby of the noisy Second Milchias spaceport. Another war was beginning. Sinister rumors spread, and the spaceport was bustling with a dizzying crowd. In the Old Milchias space area, the Federation and immigrant fleets were glaring at each other over the Original Zohar. The media was dominated by the argument that if this war spread, Second Miltia would be the first hit, and many people had been trying to evacuate from this place for a while.

The man, glancing sideways at the hustle and bustle, went to the reception counter and announced his reservation number. The spaceport employee at the counter widened his eyes at the sight of the man in Japanese clothing, which was out of place at the spaceport.

"Uh, Mr. Jin Utsuki. The vessel you are boarding is the Lohengrin-class high-speed space cruiser Elsa, belonging to the Kukai Foundation. Is that correct?"

Jin nodded back with a smile, received the magnetic card, and left the counter. The people coming and going at the spaceport were diverse, but now, the overwhelming majority were soldiers.

Just as Jin finished his procedures, Realian soldiers in Federation uniforms passed by his side. A group of soldiers was passing by. Jin Utsuki watched the backs of the soldiers with a somewhat gloomy feeling.

How many of them would be able to return to this place alive again? Jin smelled the faint scent of the sea at the seaside spaceport and said farewell to his second home in his heart.

To Miltia—the place where he had once lost everything in his life except his only blood relative—he was going again. That sense of mission weighed heavily on Jin's mind. He had ended up parting with his sister after a fight. Only a simple message was left from Shion.

She had already left Second Miltia after receiving a summons to the mobile platform 〈Dawn〉, the headquarters of Vector Industries. He had a faint regret about not having a proper farewell before this journey where he might lose his life. However, it was something that couldn't be helped by thinking about it.

"Is that Jin Utsuki?"

He was called by name from behind and turned around. There was a familiar face. A Realian to whom Jin had once entrusted data from the Miltia conflict. Jin nodded to the man.

"Long time no see, Mr. Canaan. I haven't greeted you until now, it's been a long time. I apologize."

Canaan nodded lightly and silently watched the hustle and bustle of the lobby for a while.

"Are you also on the 〈Elsa〉?" Jin nodded and looked at the soldiers overflowing the airport.

"It seems the immigrant fleet anticipated this event. I heard they invaded the Milcha space area and forcibly began descending to Old Milcha. The Federation's military response is delayed. Are they the vanguard of the stationed forces that will be their reinforcements? Representative Helmer decided to cooperate with the Federation?"

"Yes. The autonomous government is a party that is rather involved in this matter. Either way, we are not in a position to remain neutral."

"However, considering the timing of this request to us and the Foundation behind the cooperation with the Federation, it seems Representative Helmer somewhat anticipated this event."

Canaan shrugged his shoulders.

"He's been a politician for over ten years. He must have naturally acquired the ability to negotiate accordingly. It's rather appreciated and helpful that he's well-informed. It's annoying when information is doled out little by little though."

Jin remembered his blunt way of speaking and chuckled inwardly.
"You haven't changed at all, have you?"
"Thanks to you, I've re-experienced that day over a hundred times in an Encephalon Dive. I can't change—even so, I didn't think you would be accompanying us. I heard you retired from the military?"

"I was asked directly by Representative Helmer. Honestly, I worried about it, but this is a deeply rooted responsibility I must fulfill. This exploration should allow us to determine the true nature of the data inside your head.

After a fourteen-year gap, we can finally reach the deepest part of 'Labarinthyos,' the birthplace of the U-TIC organization, which we couldn't reach back then. And the Original Zohar also sleeps there—"

Walking toward the departure gate with Canaan, Jin suddenly thought of Colonel Margulis. He had heard rumors that he was alive, apparently reigning over the core of the U-TIC organization. Jin secretly sensed that he would surely meet him again on the path ahead.

"By the way, have you heard about the members who will also be boarding that spaceship called the Elsa?"

"—Besides the regular crew, there's Gaignan Kukai, the representative director of the Foundation, Chaos, whom you know, a Type-100 prototype, and a cyborg guard dispatched from the Contact Subcommittee should also be accompanying us."

"I see. They're all people with deep karmic ties, aren't they?"

Canaan stopped in front of the departure gate and looked up at the green lamp that was lit.

"Since the appearance of the Zohar, human history has been cut off from an organic chain. Humanity is trapped in the eternal drive of an energy system by someone's will. Not even allowed to perish. That's how it seems to me. The people gathered for this incident are the same."

"Are you saying that it's not some vague thing like 'karmic ties,' but that someone's will intervening is why we gathered?"

"I am probably an existence outside that flow. Just a memory function. That's why I'm allowed to feel it more intensely than you all. But it's just an impression. There's no need to think about it that seriously."

Embracing their respective thoughts, the two passed silently through the departure gate. The gate, reacting to the magnetic card in their pocket, automatically converted their physical data and departure records into a signal for air traffic control and transmitted it toward the UMN.

At this moment, the two became residents of space on record. They continued walking down the brightly lit corridor toward the hangar where the Elsa waited. Now, all roads led to the land of the old Miltia—

Jin couldn't shake off his heavy mood and thought of his home planet that had once been destroyed. He envisioned the Zohar's cold radiance, which had influenced all of humanity, sleeping in its deepest abyss. The Zohar wove and bound the future of the universe, beckoning them.

(Continued in Xenosaga Episode II: Beyond Good and Evil, Volume 2)

[Xenosaga Glossary]

[Archetype] Prototype. Refers to the mock-up (prototype) of KOS-MOS. Three years ago, it caused a self-activation and runaway incident, killing Kevin Winnicot, who was the development manager at the time. Afterwards, the mainframe portion was lost, but the current KOS-MOS was manufactured again.

[Anima's Vessel] A mysterious object that appeared around the same time as Zohar. It is a giant sickle shape, but its form seems to change depending on the viewer's subjectivity. By incorporating it into mobile weapons, output far exceeding common sense can be obtained. Anima is Latin for "soul." In Jungian psychology, it is the feminine element present in the male psyche, mainly thought to be constructed using the mother as a model. Incidentally, the contrasting concept is Animus, the masculine element residing in women.

[Amplifier] Ship-mounted Hilbert Effect amplifier. In cooperation with the Type 100 Realian, it enabled the deployment of the Hilbert Effect within a 100-kilometer radius. Its maximum weight reaches several hundred tons, meaning it can only be deployed on large vessels or cities. It is considered one of the trump cards for future Gnosis countermeasures.

[Second Development Bureau] Commonly known as the "Second Bureau." Its primary business is hardware development. It handles the development and manufacturing of ships and mobile weapons. It is the most militaristic department within Vector Industries.

[Third Development Bureau] Commonly known as the "Third Bureau." The Realian development department. By monopolizing the development of the Realian nervous system black box (OEM), it allows no other company to follow suit in Realian technology. This department also holds the control codes that manage the self-destruction of Realians.

[Voglinde] The latest cruiser developed by Vector Industries. It was garnering expectations as the first anti-Gnosis ship. It could also be called incomplete as an anti-Gnosis vessel.

[Attack Incident] The Voglinde was attacked and destroyed in the manner of Gnosis during public test operations. Until this incident occurred, Shion and the KOS-MOS development team from Vector's First Bureau were supposed to conduct activation and operational tests on the same ship.

[U-DO] Formal name: Unus Mundus Driving Operation System. A mysterious energy existence that mediates U.M.N. by controlling Zohar. In the game, it is expressed as a reddish-purple cloud image.

[Simulator] A pseudo U-DO wave constructed on the U.M.N. for URTVs to conduct mental linkage training against U-DO.

[Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Cherenkov] Voglinde Vice-Captain. A Federal Army officer. He was secretly active in various situations as an operative for the U-TIC Organization. He lost his life during the incident in Episode 1.

[Immigration Fleet] Ormus. A religious organization that claims to have been in a position to manage Zohar since before humanity ventured into space. Perhaps due to past conflicts surrounding Zohar, they have a strong desire for independence from the Federation and emphasize their extra-legal standing.

[Interlink] Using an in-body device to communicate between two people via long-distance connection through the U.M.N., or sharing nerves.

[Vector Industries] A giant conglomerate boasting thousands of years of history. Its departments cover all fields, from the development of weapons and Realians to infrastructure projects such as transportation and communication, food products, and pharmaceuticals. Wilhelm is the founder and current CEO.

[First Development Bureau] Commonly known as the "First Bureau." The First Bureau is the most traditional department at Vector and is highly regarded both inside and outside the company. Its predecessor was a public-private joint U.M.N. management business department. Currently, its primary business is the development of software such as AI and chips. In the development of KOS-MOS, it handled the development of the emotional system software. Shion Uzuki is assigned here.

[Aether] (Especial Theory of Rudimentary) Translated as "Special Rudimentary Principle." In this work, this is not a unified concept; it is sometimes used as a general term for abilities that each person uniquely exhibits. For example, the teleportation techniques that Shion and others use during combat are tentatively interpreted as Aether abilities. Only the mysterious power that Chaos possesses might be called "Aether" in the true sense.

[Elsa] A Lohengrin-class high-speed space cruiser belonging to the Kukai Foundation. With an overall length of 166 meters, it falls into the small to medium class for a cargo-passenger ship.

[Nigredo (URTV)] One of the representative directors overseeing the Kukai Foundation. His true identity is the URTV Nigredo, protected by Helmer and others during the Miltian Conflict. The reason for concealing his identity is that the existence of URTVs remains top secret even after the Miltian Conflict. On record, he is the adopted child of Gaignun Kukai. Due to his appearance, which closely resembles Gaignun, theories of him being a hidden child or a clone circulate inside and outside the foundation. His true identity is the URTV, Rubedo. His hobby is collecting antique guns.

[Curry] A staple menu item at the Moby Dick Cafe, a gathering place for students enjoying their youth on Second Miltia, and Shion Uzuki's specialty dish. It seems to be a standard meal for sailors of that era due to its high preservation and simple preparation.

[Local Phenomenal Shift] Generally, physical domains explainable by classical physics are called "local," and others are called "non-local." In this episode, when Shion mentions it, it is assumed to refer to the non-local entity U-DO influencing the local (physical) world and changing the laws of the physical domain within its range.

[Kevin Winnicot] A genius youth who worked on the basic development of KOS-MOS. He belonged to Vector First Division and was connected to Shion Uzuki by a bond stronger than that of a senior and junior colleague. His personal history before joining Vector is unknown. He was killed by the KOS-MOS archetype.

[Labyrintos] The name of the facility in Old Miltia where the U-TIC Organization conducted Zohar research. From Greek mythology.

[Hilbert Effect] A special wave generation device that translates and adheres Gnosis existing in imaginary space to physical space, enabling physical contact.

[Kukai Foundation] Established after the Miltian Conflict, its primary purpose is the relief and establishment/maintenance of living bases for the victims of the Life Recycling Law themselves. The founder, the wealthy individual Soze Kukai, is a fictional entity fabricated by the Miltian Autonomous State Government to procure activity funds. In other words, the foundation is virtually one and the same with the Miltian Autonomous State Government, and like the government, it advocates for investigating the causes of the Miltian Conflict and pursuing the D-TIC organization as activity slogans. Its headquarters is an autonomously activated space colony floating in orbit around the planet Second Miltia. It is popular as a tourist spot with classical townscapes and artificial beaches. It possesses a large number of talented individuals with special abilities who tended to be overlooked until now, such as mutants, and is currently the focus of attention throughout the star cluster due to the storage of Zohar Emulators and the protection of the Type 100 Prototype which conceals data.

[Gnosis] Mysterious entities that appeared on the historical stage after the Miltian Conflict. They mainly appear in groups and act hostile towards humanoids. Details such as the presence of intelligence or reproduction methods are completely unknown, and they have become an urgent research topic as a new crisis for humanity. Attacked humans usually experience a phenomenon called whitening, where they shatter and die, or their bodies turn into Gnosis. Physical contact is impossible because their existential phase is located in imaginary space.
To attack **[Gnosis]**, it is essential to translate them into physical space using the Hilbert Effect and then attack them, or attack them with dedicated weapons like DSSS. It is unclear whether they can even be called living beings, but various forms have been confirmed, so for convenience, names of mythical creatures have been given to their classification. Samples of their remains have been collected, but all have changed into mere sodium chloride-like substances.

[Mental Linkage] A telepathic circuit formed when URTV, etc., link their minds during operational activities.

[Star Cluster Federation] A loose federal government composed of approximately 500,000 planetary nations; representatives from each autonomous state, decided by a voting system using UMN, participate in the assembly as representatives of their planets. The current main planet is Fifth Jerusalem.

[Thought Wave] Strong thoughts released in a form that can influence the outside world.

[Contact Subcommittee] A committee established by the Federation as an organization for Gnosis countermeasures. It has over two thousand members. It is promoting "Project Zohar," a major plan for Gnosis extermination. Its headquarters are located in Fifth Jerusalem.

[Zohar] The Original Zohar. The most important object in the story, excavated on the shore of Lake Turkana in Kenya. It looks like a golden shining metal plate over ten meters tall. It is thought to be the central point of the UMN wave, but the full extent of its nature is unknown. As a result of the Miltian conflict, it was left behind in the Old Miltian space area.

[---Emulator] A pseudo-Zohar created by Dr. Joachim Mizrahi. Its appearance closely resembles the Original Zohar, and its performance is also reproduced at a considerable level. Currently, a total of twelve units have been confirmed, all of which are managed by the Kukai Foundation.

[Heaven's Chariot] Also known as Proto Merkabah. A giant plant where one hundred prototypes were manufactured. It was built by the former U-TIC Organization centered around Joachim Mizrahi. It seems to exhibit its true function when combined with the Song of Nephilim device and the Zohar, but it was summoned into orbit around the Second Miltian planet by Albedo and then largely destroyed.

[Durandal] The flagship of the Kukai Foundation. A heavily armed vessel over four thousand meters long.Dock with the Foundation's colony and become its main propulsion engine. The repository for the Soharl Emulator also exists within the Durandal.

[Nanomachines] Primarily chemically synthesized, extremely subtle molecular mechanisms used mainly for human treatment. In the world of Xenosaga, more complex medical activities became possible, and most injuries and illnesses could be treated with these nanomachines and mechanical medicine. As a result, doctors as technicians became unnecessary, except for mental illnesses.

[Nefilim] An conscious entity that frequently appears before Shion, hinting at her future and giving cryptic advice. Takes the form of a young girl. Incidentally, in the Old Testament, the Nephilim were giants or demigods who lived on earth before humanity.

[Project Zohar] A Gnosis extermination plan promoted by the Contact Subcommittee.

[---'s Singing Device] A device that affects the mental activities of people and Realiens, disrupting their wavelengths. It is believed to have played an important role during the Miltian conflict. The generator itself was in the shape of a tower several dozen meters tall, and during the conflict, it was placed near the severe neurological ward. Its true nature, such as summoning a large group of Gnosis by combining with the "Heavenly Vessel," remains a mystery, but unfortunately the generator itself burned up in the atmosphere of Second Miltia along with the "Heavenly Vessel." Allows the deployment of the Toefect. A part that is almost incomprehensible even to researchers in the field.

[Pleroma] One of the U-TIC Organization's headquarters. A giant cross-shaped rock mass drifting in space. The interior is more like a cathedral than a base. The abducted MOMO was temporarily imprisoned there, but the cyborg Zigurat 8, acting on orders from the Contact Subcommittee, infiltrated alone and successfully rescued her. Its name is derived from the name of the observation vessel that found Lost Jerusalem.

[Life Recycle Law] A federal law encouraging the research and development of human cloning, genetic modification, and cyborg technology. It was passed in T.C. 4591 to supplement the human resources depleted by space development and was continuously enforced for 160 years thereafter. It led to a significant decline in bioethics, including human experimentation, and has now been abolished.

[Miltia] A planet that becomes one of the points. Through certain circumstances, Zohar research was conducted here. As a result of the Miltian conflict, its city area was sealed off by a dual black hole and isolated in space. Shion Uzuki's hometown.

[Second Miltia] The planet colonized by people who escaped Old Miltia after the Miltian conflict.

[Autonomous State Government] The autonomous state government that currently governs Second Miltia, represented by Chief Councilor Helmer. It is attracting the attention of various forces in the star cluster through its cooperation with Vector Industries and its internal organization, the Foundation. The government's biggest goal at present is the Miltian conflict.

[Telepathy] Conversation without using the physical voice, conducted by URTVs using the sharing of thoughts generated by mental linkage. It can be done regardless of distance. Unnecessary thoughts can be cut off with a mental barrier, and only the required information can be freely transmitted.

[Hyams Heavy Industries] A giant corporation that develops weapons and seems to be connected to Ormus.

[Type 100 General Observation Realian] High-performance Realiens that are being rushed for deployment to all star cluster fleets simultaneously with the Amplifier. In addition to their outstanding observation capabilities and machine operation capabilities, they demonstrate high MOMbeck performance in Gnosis countermeasures, such as enabling the activation of the Hilbert effect in cooperation with the Amplifier.

[--- Prototype] The last Realian created by Joachim Mizrahi, which later became part of the Type 100 General Observation Realian. It was manufactured at the giant energy plant "Heavenly Water" that existed in Old Miltia, and data was hidden in the depths of its mind by Joachim Mizrahi.

[Ultra-wide area ---] The mechanism installed in KOS-MOS allows the Hilbert effect to be deployed over several astronomical units without cooperation with the Amplifier.

[LOST JERUSALEM] Humanity's lost capital, referring to the planet Earth where humanity originated. Currently, its location coordinates are unknown, and it is unclear if it still exists.

[REALIEN] Synthetic humans created by combining chemistry and mechanical technology. Since the abolition of the Life Recycling Law, they have played a central role in space development. They are mainly developed, managed, and shipped by the Vector company.

[ES] Es. A name given to mobile weapons equipped with the Anima Vessel. They have overwhelmingly superior performance compared to normal weapons such as A.M.W.S., and one unit is comparable to the military strength of one star cluster. Due to their nature, mass production is impossible, and their number is very small.

[URTV] U.R.T.V. or U-Do Retro Virus. Children born through genetic manipulation by Dr. Dimitri Yuriev, who has a strong obsession and fear of U-Do. They have the ability to link to the U.M.N. and interfere with its waves. Their genetic father is Dr. Dimitri Yuriev. The mother is unknown. 669 units were created, but the unit was wiped out during the Miltia conflict, and only three variants (individual numbers 665, 667, and 669) are confirmed to be currently existing.

[AMWS] AIMS Assault Maneuver Weapon System (Assault Maneuver Weapon System). It has excellent cost performance and versatility, and has become one of the main forces of all factions in the star cluster. However, for example, there are large differences in the U.M.N. operational technology between the Federation and the U-TIC Organization regarding Zohar, and even if they are called the same A.M.W.S., especially in the energy control system, they can be considered completely different weapons. However, for convenience, most assault humanoid weapons are collectively referred to by this name. There is also a weapon system called A.G.W.S. (Aiks) which is miniaturized for use against Gnosis, but it does not appear in this episode.

[KOS-MOS] Meaning "Strategic Multi-purpose Control System Subservient to Order." A next-generation android development project led by Vector Industries. While chemical synthesis types such as Realien are mainstream, KOS-MOS is designed to be entirely mechanical. The full scope of its development background is still unknown, but considering its connection to Project Zohar promoted by the Contact Subcommittee, it is clear that it is a huge project involving not only the Vector company but the entire star cluster. After the death of Kevin Winnicott, who was the overall development director, the development center remained in the First Division, but in this episode, it was transferred to the Second Division. Shion Uzuki is involved in the development of the integrated OS, which can be called the core part of its thinking.

[UMN] U.M.N. Unus Mundus Network. A technology that enables superluminal transfer of matter and information using special wave functions that should not be possible in physical space or imaginary space. In the space age depicted in this work, it is an indispensable technology as a key for transportation and communication.

[Management Bureau] Management bureaus are placed on major planets mainly for the necessity of transportation, which is that "living bodies cannot be transferred". Currently, the star cluster federal government manages the U.M.N., but its operation has received technical support and material supply from Vector Industries since the early days of development, and the two are still in close cooperation.

[---Column] When performing U.M.N. transfer, a pulse transmitted from a column relay point is received, and the destination is reached via that pulse. Jumping gates from outside the column range is theoretically considered impossible.

[Individual Number 665 and earlier. Dull standard type] They have blond hair, and there are no individual differences in appearance or personality.

[Variants] Individuals 666 and later. When they were fertilized eggs, they had unique names: Rubedo, Albedo, Citrine, and Nigredo. Compared to the standard type, they have much stronger anti-waves and each has special abilities. Please refer to the work for details on those abilities.

[U-TIC Organization] U-TIC. Its predecessor was the Mizrahi Quantum Physics Research Institute established by Dr. Joachim Mizrahi. The U-TIC Organization was established based on this research institute for the study of Zohar. It took up arms during the Miltia conflict, causing confusion and expansion of the conflict. It is currently an underground organization and does not belong to the Federation.

[End-of-book Essay]
The EPR Paradox and the Unus Mundus (One World)

Written By Tadasu Aizawa

Looking through the extensive setting guides for Xenosaga, it states that "the technology of the U.M.N. (Unus Mundus Network) applies the EPR paradox." I'd like to add a short note about that.
Quantum theory, which had been shocking physics throughout the 1920s, was finally formalized in 1927 with Heisenberg's announcement of the physical uncertainty principle. This principle expresses that the momentum and position of a quantum particle (atom or photon) cannot be measured simultaneously (they are uncertain). Simply put, this is a formula that proves "the act of observation itself creates the observation result."

As a specific example, there is the famous experiment conducted by Bohr, Heisenberg's colleague. Until the end of the 19th century, it was thought that the universe contained two types of energy with greatly different properties (wave type and particle type). Light was considered to be this wave energy, but it was found that depending on the observation method, it could exhibit the behavior of particle energy. However, with another observation method, it would conversely show the properties of wave energy, and the particle behavior would be hidden.

The uncertainty principle in physics is generally called quantum theory. What quantum theory showed was that "the laboratory determines the experimental results." The physical approach became relative, meaning that truth could never be reached. Many physicists felt a backlash against this. Albert Einstein, who had previously beaten classical physics with the theory of special relativity, was one of them.

The "EPR Paradox" was announced by three physicists—Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen—as the beginning of an anti-quantum theory movement to re-examine quantum theory in response to this trend.
The formula that the EPR group created using quantum theory was, for example, something like this:

"If the total momentum and direction of motion of two photons, A and B, that have been in contact are measured in advance, then later, for the two photons moving in exactly opposite directions, the momentum and direction of motion of photon B can be known by measuring only photon A." This formula holds true regardless of how many light-years apart the two photons are.

The great principles proven by the theory of special relativity include: 1. Nothing can ever move faster than light, and 2. Objects at a distance cannot influence each other. The state expressed in the previous formula conflicts with <Principle 1>, where the information of photon B is transmitted to photon A faster than the speed of light, and also conflicts with <Principle 2>, where photon A collapses the probability wave of photon B (a probability wave is a wave function used in quantum theory, which is the phase of an object that the act of observation hides).
The EPR group intended to use this formula to show that quantum theory was a desk theory describing something that could not exist in reality. Although many new interpretations have been offered regarding Principle 2 today, at the time, Einstein called this quantum-theoretical (i.e., information-theoretical) correlation, which should not exist based on the principles, "spooky" and found it quite eerie.

However, perhaps because the content of this paradox was too interesting, it was later brought up here and there beyond the EPR group's expectations for its announcement. The psychologists in the lineage connected to C. G. Jung paid the most attention to this in the field of psychology.

Jung had previously named the "spooky" medium (a complex, intertwined network of signifiers) hidden within human society and language itself as the "one world" (unus mundus). This medium is formed by unknowable and absolute cultural/mythological codes (archetypes), independent of individual contexts.

To make it easier to understand by just taking out the logical part, it's like this: Assume there is a married couple AB here. Same-sex marriage is not recognized in Japan today, so if A is known to be female, B...Being a human being - whether you are in a neighborhood pachinko parlor or exploring a planet tens of thousands of light-years away - you can know instantly. Information is traveling almost all the time, ignoring limits like the speed of light. No radio waves or sound waves are needed. A faster-than-light database that has no physical existence. In this way, if you live normally as a human being, you can say that you are routinely using the circuit network of the "One World" (U.M.N!).

The example given earlier is a trivial one, but what the Jungian school attempted was to model the relationship between this network and humans as a culture/mythology model. However, Jung himself said that "it is impossible to describe such an archetype directly." It might be a point to note that the results of the EPR group were expressed through paradoxes (not direct descriptions).

The interpretation of the world of Xenosaga recommended by this book is to enjoy such a mysterious and familiar phenomenon with a more dynamic image by arranging a super-object called "Zohar".
Oh yes. Speaking of Zohar, I once read in a magazine that the Yale school, which was doing deconstruction under the influence of Derrida and others, had turned to Kabbalah studies and was deciphering the Old Testament and the "Book of Radiance". Harold Bloom and others are deciphering Wordsworth and others by taking the "archetype of reading" from the Kabbalah. Is this the literary version of Jungian activity! If you are not careful, it is just short of a hidden, mystical mysticism that goes along with "Foucault's Pendulum" (Bloom's nickname is said to be "university shaman").

However, this reminds me that Jung, the late McLuhan, and others are often talked about with the label of mystics.[13] The fantasies of these genuine visionaries, with their suffocating logic, are actually eagerly aiming for a leap to the distant and yet near "One World".

Albedo Piazzola's longing for U-DO, who plays the role of the trickster in the main story, is somewhat similar to this. Incidentally, this trickster is a type of folk tale hero who has a paradoxical function, and is one of the personalities/characters that appear from the archetypes raised by Jung.

[13] Jung was an alchemy practitioner who communed with Phanes.

[To Be Continued In Volume 2]